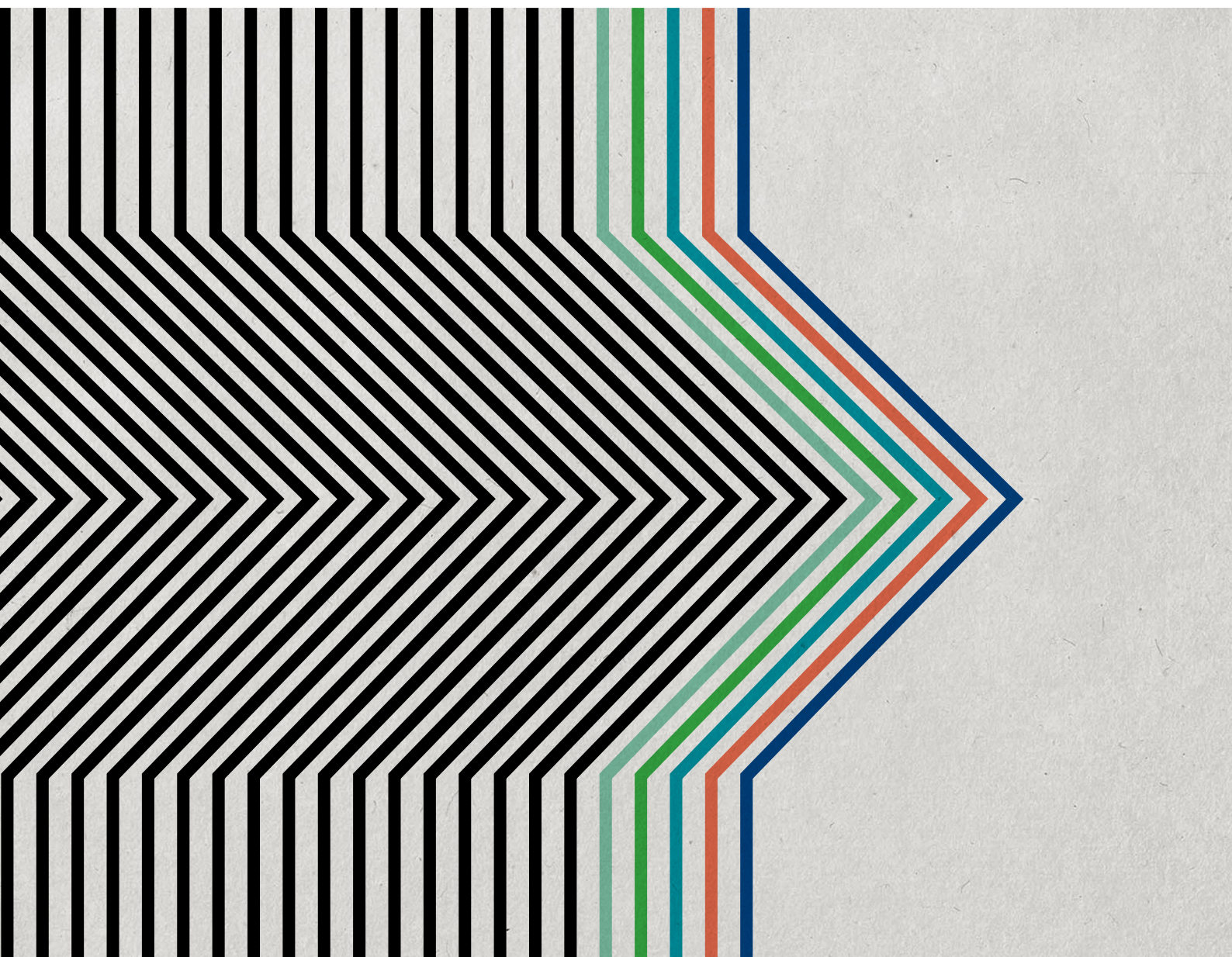


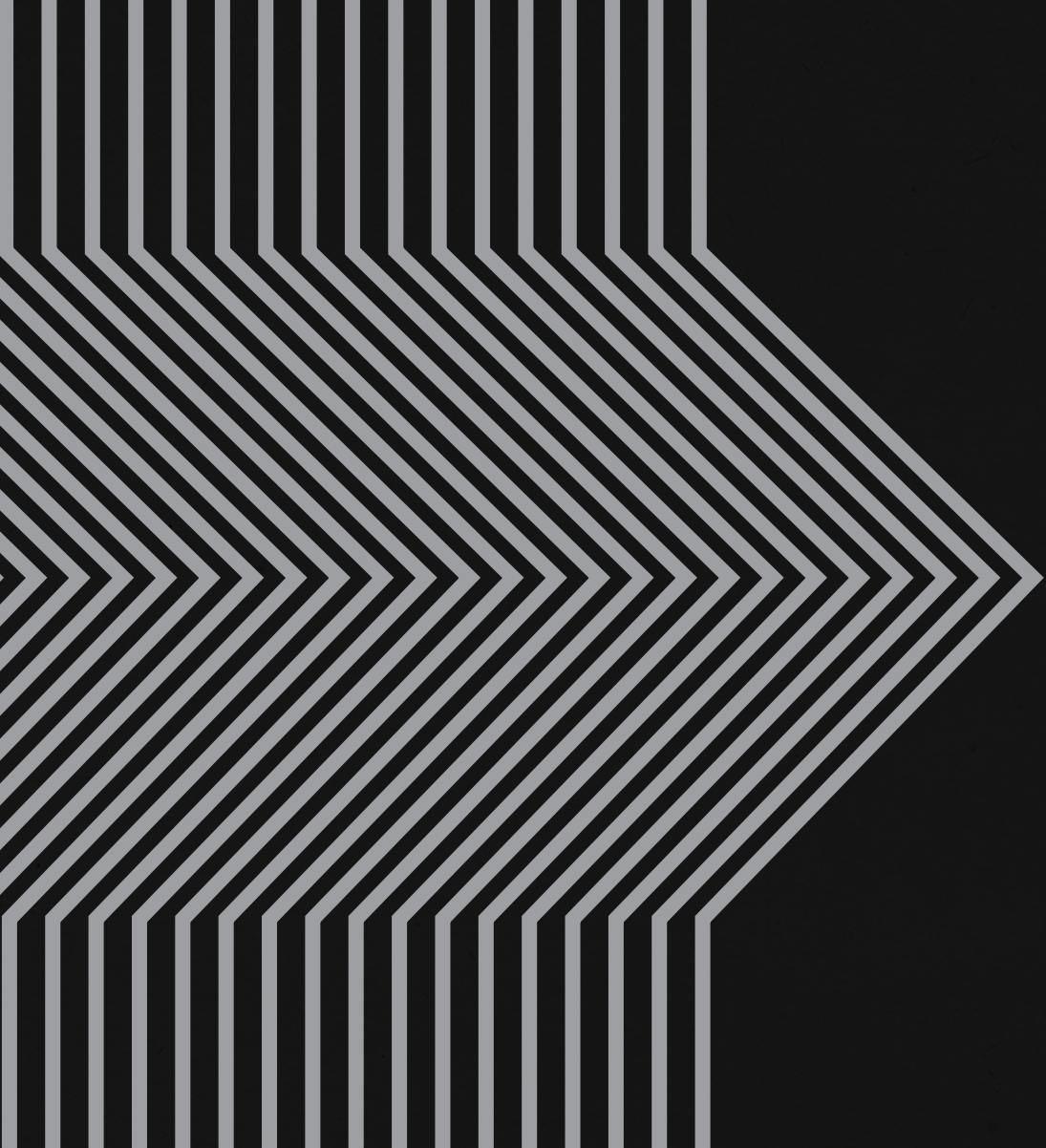


Chinese International Students' Wellbeing in Australia

The Road to Recovery

Fran Martin





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The Road to Recovery

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List of abbreviations

CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CBD	Central business district
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CET	Centre for English Teaching
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CSSA	Chinese Students and Scholars Association
ED	Emergency department (hospital)
ESOS	Education Services for Overseas Students
FWO	Fair Work Ombudsman
Go8	Group of Eight (universities)
GP	General practitioner (of medicine)
HE	Higher education
IEAA	International Education Association of Australia
ISANA	International Education Association
MELS	Migrant Employment Legal Service
MWT	Migrant Workers Taskforce
OSHC	Overseas Student Health Cover
PR	Permanent Residency (visa)
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAA	Student Accommodation Association
STI	Sexually transmitted infection
TCM	Traditional Chinese Medicine

Introduction: Reorienting Australian international education after COVID-19

Education is among Australia's most valuable exports. In 2018-19, it ranked fourth after primary extractive industries and contributed \$37.6 billion to the national economy.¹ In recent years, students from the People's Republic of China have consistently been the biggest group of international students—about 30%—with over 200,000 studying in Australia as at September 2019.² Of all education sectors, the largest volume of international student enrolments are in higher education, where Chinese students accounted for 37.3% in 2019.³ In Go8 universities, these students comprise 60% of the international student body.⁴ Enrolments by students from China have continued to grow annually over the past decade,⁵ despite predictions of impending slowdown.⁶

The economic benefits of Australian international education are well known. Not only does fee income from international students contribute significantly to the revenue of the nation's universities, but students' spending on other goods and services also makes a significant contribution to the economies of the communities where they live. International students also contribute social benefit through the cultural enrichment of communities, and public diplomacy benefit, with their potential to serve as soft-power ambassadors when they return to their home countries; some, eventually to serve in high-ranking positions in overseas governments.⁷

The COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020 has caused unprecedented disruption to Australian international education. Travel bans have seen around 120,000 of our international students stuck overseas. Conversely, many are struggling financially while stranded in Australia: without income from casual work, excluded from federal

safety nets, and lacking the means to return home. Universities Australia, meanwhile, estimates that revenue across the nation's universities will decline by \$AUD 3 to 4.6 billion in 2020 as a result of the disruption to international enrolments.⁸ Anxieties are running high about the future of international education in Australia.

This report proposes that

this is a crucial policy moment. Now is the time to take decisive action to shape perceptions of the international student experience in Australia to support market recovery post-crisis. The possible competitive advantage conferred by Australia's successful management of the virus to date is only a small part of the picture. A student-centric approach with a holistic focus on wellbeing and social inclusion can differentiate the Australian product to ensure that the nation remains an attractive study destination, building a solid foundation for the long-term sustainability of international education in Australia.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the financial reliance of Australian universities on fee income from Chinese students was causing some to sound a note of alarm about the consequences should this market contract.⁹ While universities are making efforts to diversify source countries

1 Department of Education 2019. *Research Snapshot*.

2 Department of Education 2019. *Student Numbers*.

3 Department of Education Skills and Employment 2019.

4 Gill and Jakobson 2017.

5 ICEF Monitor 2018.

6 Department of Education and Training 2016.

7 Universities Australia 2012, p. 1; Universities Australia 2009.

8 Universities Australia 2020.

9 Gill and Jakobson 2017; Babones 2019.

for international enrolments, relative levels and speeds of economic development in alternative source countries mean that it is unlikely in the short to medium term that China could be replaced. A pressing question, then, concerns mitigating the factors that may adversely affect this market over the next five to ten years. This is recognized in the establishment of the higher education [Global Reputation Taskforce](#) to address reputational risk to Australia in the wake of the 2019-2020 bushfire emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perceived hospitality, living and wellbeing factors rank highly in prospective international students' choice of a country in which to study. The most recent QS International Student Survey of over 77,000 respondents shows that the most significant concerns for prospective students globally relate to everyday living matters like housing, employment, and safety, rather than academic considerations. Indeed, the perception of whether a place is welcoming to international students is prospective students' number one factor in selecting a country and a city in which to study.¹⁰ A sense of local connection, including the opportunity to make local friends, is also a prime factor influencing students' propensity to recommend a study destination to acquaintances.¹¹ And the QS survey shows that influence from acquaintances plays a significant role in prospective students' decision making, especially in the case of students from China who are much more likely than average (87%) to know an international student.¹² The living experiences of current cohorts of Chinese students in Australia, then, have strong potential to influence the choices of future students about where to study.

Over recent years, Australia has been perceived by international students generally as a relatively

welcoming and safe host nation that offers significant lifestyle benefits compared to its competitors.¹³ However, in an age of instantaneous digital communication, when international students do have bad experiences, news spreads directly and immediately back to their parents and social networks at home. This was seen clearly in 2009 when the spate of attacks on Indian students in Melbourne and Sydney culminated in an international incident between the Indian and Australian governments.¹⁴ A similar effect is seen in Australia's Chinese student communities as well. Bad news stories, for example about Chinese student suicides (like those of [Zhikai Liu](#) in 2016 and [Jiaqi He](#) in 2019) or Chinese students becoming victims of crime (like the [violent attack](#) on three Chinese students in Canberra in 2017, and the COVID-related [assault](#) on two international students in Melbourne in 2020) circulate instantaneously back home via WeChat and other social media. Less dramatically but more pervasively, individual students' reflections on their personal experiences of life in Australia are also relayed quickly back to home communities. Whether those experiences are good, bad, or indifferent is instrumental in shaping interest in Australia as a study destination. If students are welcomed and included in Australian communities, feel happy living here, and develop a sense of local belonging, their word-of-mouth in communicating this to home networks has the potential to be more effective than any glossy marketing campaign.¹⁵

We now stand at a crossroads. Investing appropriate resources in maintaining and improving international students' experience will protect and enhance Australia's reputation as a safe, welcoming and recommendable place to study. Conversely, failing to allow support provision to keep pace with rising student numbers

risks degrading the student experience and eroding the nation's desirability as an education destination. Accordingly, this report asks: how can we ensure that Australian international education remains attractive to its major market by protecting and improving the quality of the student experience?

Safeguarding Australia's reputation as a top choice for international study relies on fostering quality rather than seeking growth at all costs. And it is clear that the quality of students' experience does not rely solely on the excellence of the education they receive. Rather, as the Hon. Bruce Baird observed in his 2010 review of the ESOS Act, "Australia's international education reputation depends on how well we provide for the wellbeing of international students and their whole experience of studying and living in Australia."¹⁶

In this report, wellbeing is defined in a multidimensional sense to include not only physical wellbeing (good physical health, security of the person, basic physical needs being met) but also mental wellbeing (good mental health), social wellbeing (inclusion, freedom from exploitation, a sense of agency in interactions with others) and emotional wellbeing (positive feelings dominating negative ones). Supporting wellbeing in this holistic sense means optimizing the provision of information, services and resources to international students to help them meet challenges they face in a new environment in key areas including safety, accommodation, employment, healthcare and social inclusion. Currently, these areas are addressed somewhat unevenly though a patchwork of support services offered by federal, state and local governments, education providers, education agents, and other public, commercial, church and community agencies. This report makes the case for a more

systematic approach to international students' wellbeing in Australia based on the development of clearer, more consistent and more enforceable standards, and increased investment by governments and education providers. Many organizations and individuals in international student support services across government and education sectors are already working at capacity to advance some of the aims proposed in this report. It is not realistic to demand that they do more without increased resources. Given the significant revenues generated for both universities and the wider Australian community by international students' fees and spending, it is reasonable to suggest that a proportion of this income be re-invested to safeguard these students' wellbeing.

Since the rapid expansion of international education around the turn of the millennium, Australian governments have tended to understand international students primarily as consumers of an educational product.¹⁷ As Simon Marginson and colleagues observe, international students in Australia have historically been subject to strong regulation but minimal rights protection.¹⁸ It is, however, now being more widely recognized that Australian governments and education providers have a responsibility to develop a deeper understanding of the human needs of these students as part of our national youth population. Initiatives to understand and improve international students' experience include the Senate inquiry into the Welfare of International Students in 2009,¹⁹ in the wake of the attacks on Indian students; the *International Students Strategy for Australia (2010-2014)* produced by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG);²⁰ the 2010 Baird review of the ESOS Act and [subsequent amendments](#) to this legislative framework;²¹

10 QS Enrolment Solutions 2019.

11 Ammigan and Langton 2018.

12 QS Enrolment Solutions 2019, p. 40.

13 Hobsons Solutions 2017.

14 Babacan *et al* 2010.

15 Pejic 2012, p. 10.

16 Baird 2010.

17 Marginson *et al* 2010, pp. 66-68; Longstaff 2017; Kell and Vogl 2012; Robertson 2013, pp. 43-67.

18 Ramia *et al* 2013; Monani and Jakubowicz 2010; Robertson 2011.

19 Commonwealth of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009.

20 Council of Australian Governments 2010-2014.

21 Baird 2010

and changes made to the student visa program following the 2011 Knight review.²² More recently, the Federal Government's recognition of the importance of acting strategically to protect the nation's position as a global leader in international education has been demonstrated by its convening of the Council for International Education and release of the *National Strategy for International Education 2025*,²³ incorporating commitments to improve international student support services connected with accommodation, public transport and work opportunities. Local governments in metropolitan areas, especially in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, have also implemented various initiatives for their international student residents including welcome ceremonies, in-language online information provision, and the establishment of international student hubs.

Notwithstanding these hopeful developments, frameworks to protect international students' wellbeing and community participation lag far behind those aimed at protecting their consumer rights. For example, State and Commonwealth Ombudsmen are empowered to deal with complaints about providers of education services, but this does not cover students' wider extra-curricular lives.²⁴ Amendments to the ESOS Act, meanwhile, have related largely to quality control in education service provision rather than taking a holistic approach to students' wellbeing.²⁵ Legal responsibility for international students' welfare under this Act is devolved to education providers, but this duty of care is largely non-specific and non-enforceable.²⁶ In the case of the Chinese students who are the focus of this report, in practice, significant aspects of their social support services in Australia are provided ad hoc by family and friends, commercial agents, and evangelical churches, which is arguably not an optimal situation.

Based on the research findings presented, this report proposes that we need to move decisively beyond the consumer protection approach to international students and see them instead as part of our national youth population, and as residents with rights based on their social citizenship in the communities where they live, work, access services, and pay taxes.²⁷ International students constitute a significant population requiring social services that are not and cannot effectively be delivered by education providers alone. Federal, state, territory and local governments and their agencies also have a responsibility to invest in safeguarding the wellbeing of this section our national community. Devoting appropriate resources to ensuring these students' welfare while they live in our communities is not only important because it will help protect the nation's reputation as a desirable destination for international education; it is also a basic ethical responsibility for Australia as these young people's temporary home.

The research findings on which this report is based arise from a five-year study funded by the Australian Research Council. Devoting herself fulltime to this project, between June 2015 and June 2020, the author, who is fluent in Mandarin, undertook a multi-sited longitudinal ethnographic study of a core group of 50 young women from the People's Republic of China (PRC) who travelled to Australia for tertiary education (See Appendix for detailed methodology). The focus was on Chinese students' social and subjective experiences of educational mobility: everything outside of study. The project was motivated both by academic questions about how international education impacts on the formation of young women's sense of identity (a question addressed in a forthcoming academic book²⁸), and more pragmatic questions about Chinese students' experiences of life and wellbeing in Australian cities. This report addresses this second question.

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Other outputs from this research project can be accessed at: <https://mobileselves.org/publications>.

22 Department of Education 2011.

23 Australian Government 2016.

24 Commonwealth Ombudsman 2020, *Frequently Asked Questions*.

25 Department of Education 2017.

26 Ramia *et al.* 2013, pp. 77-99.

27 This resonates with proposals made by Ramia *et al* 2013, pp. 137-155, and Kell and Vogl 2012, pp 169-183. See also Monani and Jakubowicz 2010.

28 Martin forthcoming.

Executive summary

What are the problems?

A key purpose of this report is to identify problems in the Chinese international student experience. It is important to underline that these problems are not universal and are experienced to widely varying extents depending on individuals' circumstances.

The study found that Chinese international students in Australia experience a number of vulnerabilities including: restricted access to reliable local information; exploitation in rental accommodation; racism, social exclusion, and restricted opportunities for intercultural mixing; restricted work opportunities and exploitation at work; difficulties understanding and engaging with Australian police processes; and difficulties accessing Australian health systems including mental health support.

Addressing these problems takes on special urgency in the context of the HE sector's post-COVID recovery efforts.

What are the solutions?

The detailed recommendations presented in each section of this report are based on the central recommendation that

international students should be reconceptualized as part of the national youth population and residents in local communities, with associated rights as such.

The report identifies four cornerstone needs:

1. The need for **more effective communication**, especially in-language and via relevant social media. EG:
 - › consistent and up-to-date information on tenants' rights, community engagement opportunities, work rights, personal safety and police processes, and health systems.
2. The need for **more effective regulation** to protect international students' rights. EG:
 - › regulatory oversight of information provided to international students by various government, educational, commercial and community agencies;

- › regulation of homestay standards;
- › regulation of high concentrations of international students of a single nationality in courses;
- › regulation of support for international students' social inclusion on campus;
- › regulation of the monetization of professional development and work opportunities for international students by commercial agencies;
- › regulation of support for international students' mental health;
- › review of the legal basis for discrimination by employers based on job applicants' visa status.

3. The need for **increased support** for local services and agencies to enable them to respond effectively to international students' needs. EG:
 - › support for the provision of accessible and affordable advice on tenants' rights to allow international students to access safe, fairly priced accommodation;
 - › support for universities to provide affordable, socially integrated international student housing;
 - › support for the Fair Work Ombudsman to engage effectively with international student workers;
 - › support for the provision of accessible and affordable advice on rights at work to allow international students to avoid work exploitation;
 - › support for state service providers including social workers and public mental health services to formally to extend their services to international students.
4. The need for **further collaboration** with CALD communities with relevant intercultural skills to develop the most effective channels and systems to safeguard international students' wellbeing. EG:
 - › collaborations by police, health service providers, community legal centres, tenants' unions, consumer regulators, Ombudsmen, welfare agencies, and student support services.

Who are Chinese international students?

Chinese international students are a diverse group in many respects, including their age and stage of study when they arrive in Australia, family background, academic ability, area of study, ethnicity, language, religion, and individual personality and outlook. Any generalization is necessarily a simplification, but some basic observations can be made to paint a broad-brushstroke picture.

By far the largest numbers of Chinese international students in Australia study in higher education institutions,²⁹ but they arrive at different times. Several thousand each year study in Australian secondary schools, arriving in Australia during their mid-teens, and most of these subsequently progress to university study in Australia. Others arrive immediately after secondary schooling in China. Some families choose to send their child abroad for study after completing the equivalent of Year 11: this allows the student to bypass the pressures of the fiercely competitive Chinese college entrance exam (*gaokao*) and move straight into a foundation studies course in Australia that readies them to enter an Australian university. Others sit the *gaokao* and come to Australia immediately after. Students in these categories will typically be seventeen or eighteen years old when they first arrive in Australia. Those who undertake secondary schooling in China prior to studying overseas attend a wide range of different types of schools, from regular government schools, to elite private boarding schools, to selective state key schools, to international schools with bilingual or English-only modes of instruction. Another group of students comes to Australia for the final year or two of their bachelor's degree on Joint Programs between Chinese and Australian universities. A significant number of students also come to Australia for masters level study, either straight after completing a Chinese bachelor's degree, or sometimes after working professionally for a couple of years. Students in this category will be in their early-to-mid twenties when they first arrive

in Australia. Far smaller numbers come for PhD study, and mature-age tertiary study is relatively uncommon for Chinese students.

Given the high fees they must pay to study at Australian universities, it is not surprising that the majority of Chinese students who study in Australia come from middle-class or elite families. Today's Chinese students are overwhelmingly privately funded, with fees paid by their parents. This distinguishes them from other cohorts, such as Indian students, who tend to be self-funded and work while studying in order to cover university fees.³⁰ Chinese PhD students, however, are more likely than undergraduate and masters students to be government funded.

In China, the deceptively simply category of "middle class" comprises a vast array of different income levels and social statuses. In this study, although all participants' families could be classified broadly as belonging to China's middle classes, they demonstrated a wide spread from the lower to the upper segments of this complex class formation. At one extreme, a few families subsisted on income from small-scale businesses that involved parents in hands-on manufacturing and retail activities; at the other extreme, some parents were high-ranking officials and wealthy professionals with significant investment holdings. Reflecting China's turbulent social history during the late twentieth century, when the education system was shut down for a decade during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the educational history of participants' families was also diverse. Some parents had only basic levels of education and had begun life as smallholding farmers then made money as entrepreneurs after the end of Maoism; others were born into much more privileged circumstances and held masters degrees or PhDs.

Reflecting their class position, a large proportion of Chinese students able to travel abroad for study hail from China's wealthy eastern seaboard, with

29 Department of Education 2019, *International Student Data*.
30 Baas 2012.

smaller numbers from central and southwestern provinces and relatively few from the nation's poorer northwest. Most are used to living in metropolitan areas: even in cases where students were born in rural areas, they are likely to have travelled to mid-to-large sized cities for education before leaving China. Boarding away from home during schooling is a relatively common childhood experience in this group.

Chinese government statistics show that 60% of students leaving China for international study are female, and this is reflected in Australia, where over half of Chinese international students are women.³¹ This partly reflects family dynamics in China's single-child generations. The Chinese students who are currently in Australia belong to the generations affected by the government's population limitation policy, so the majority have no siblings. In this situation, parents are willing to invest in daughters the resources that might once have been reserved for sons, including financing overseas education.

Students who travel from China to Australia to study have a wide range of academic abilities. In China, even the most prestigious Australian universities are generally considered inferior to China's top-ranked institutions, and the extreme difficulty of obtaining the exam grades necessary to be accepted into one of China's top fifty universities is one push-factor driving students to seek degrees abroad. Australian institutions are considered second-best, too, compared with America's Ivy League universities. Thus, it is relatively unlikely for the very top level of China's academic elite to come to Australia for undergraduate or masters coursework study. However, among those who do come, many are gifted students who excel academically and win scholarships and other prizes for scholarly achievement. At the other end of the spectrum are students who scored lower in the Chinese exam system, for whom an Australian degree represents

a possible way out of a professional future that might otherwise be doomed by a degree from a low-ranked university in China.

A majority of students from China are of the dominant Han ethnicity, but some belong to one of China's 55 ethnic minorities, with their distinct cultural, linguistic and religious traditions. All students speak Mandarin fluently, as it is the official national language. However, many will also be conversant with one or more of a wide array of locally and regionally specific dialects and languages, which may be used in family contexts. A majority of students do not hold religious beliefs, and China is a secular state whose government keeps religious activities under tight rein. However, some students come from families who adhere to various faiths including Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and other forms of Christianity.

While these broad observations can be made about Chinese international students in Australia, what this discussion underlines most strongly is the diversity of their backgrounds and experiences, reminding us of the need to be wary of sweeping generalizations.

1

Information provision

Problems identified in this section include that Chinese international students:

- Are not effectively served by information provided in English only and through hardcopy media, Web 1.0 platforms (EG websites), email, or non-Chinese social media (EG Facebook);
- Are vulnerable to misinformation from in-language information about local matters gleaned from social media, education and migration agents, and other sources.

The ability to access reliable, relevant, up-to-date information about local life is obviously a fundamental requirement for international students.³² Many of these young people are living away from home for the first time and negotiating the complexities of independent living is challenging for any young person. All the more so when one is living far from social support networks in an unfamiliar country with unknown systems and managing life in a foreign language. Students require information on an array of topics not directly related to study, for example personal safety, rights at work, tenancy rights, police functions, what to do in an emergency, and the Australian health system. Importantly, information about local life and services must also be available to students' families so that they can help students plan for and negotiate life in Australia in a realistic and effective way. Australian agencies face a double challenge here. First, they must understand the culturally specific informational needs and information seeking habits of particular international student populations. Second, they must keep pace with the fast-changing world of youth media and information-seeking practices generally.³³

Currently, information about local life, systems and services is provided to Chinese international students in a variety of ways. First, it is provided in-language in verbal presentations at pre-departure meetings in China organized by education agents and some Australian universities. Second, students are given information by Australian education providers, usually in English only and usually all at once during orientation sessions at the commencement of study. Third, basic information is available on websites maintained by Australian federal, state and local government bodies, mostly in English, but now in some cases (EG the Study in Australia, Study Melbourne and Study Sydney websites) also in multilingual formats.³⁴ Fourth, Australian governments and universities are increasingly maintaining Chinese-language social media accounts (for example on Weibo, QQ, Youku and WeChat);³⁵ however, these are run with varying effectiveness and achieve uneven reach.

This study found that participants tended to seek information about aspects of local life in a highly targeted way when specific problems arose. The kinds of questions participants asked the author—how can I find a doctor who accepts OSHC insurance? Should I call the police if I am underpaid at work? Where can I get help if I want to self-harm? What can I do if I am cheated by my landlord?—suggest that if answers to such questions are being provided to these students, then they are not being effectively absorbed. Instead, students need a way to access reliable local information on particular questions “on demand,” when specific issues arise.

When the need does arise, Chinese students are likely to turn to in-language social media, especially WeChat public accounts, to seek this type of local information. Although the WeChat “mega-app” is a Chinese platform developed in and centrally administered from China, there exist scores of local public subscription accounts run

31 Renmin Ribao 2016; Australian Education International 2012.

32 Baird 2010; State of Victoria, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009.

33 Chang *et al* 2018.

34 EG studyinaustralia.gov.au; studymelbourne.vic.gov.au; study.sydney.edu.au; insiderguides.com.au/; See also ISANA's template for institutions, available at: isana.org.au/the-rainbow-guide.

35 Government accounts are indexed here: studyinaustralia.gov.au/social-feed.

by members of the Chinese diaspora in Australian cities.³⁶ Many of these target an international student readership (indeed, many also employ these students as casual writers), and offer news, information and advice on many aspects of local life, from sales and discounts to restaurants and tourist attractions to crime, migration policy, real estate investment, weather, and local services and systems. Within China, WeChat is currently among the most—possibly *the* most—widely used smartphone app, with an [estimated one billion active monthly users as of 2019](#). Because Chinese students arriving in Australia are almost all already habitual users of the app, they tend to continue this usage while living here, subscribing to local public accounts and consulting co-national peers to find out about life in Australia.³⁷

The Australia-based WeChat public accounts with the biggest readership are media businesses that rely on generating clicks to secure advertising revenue. Often, such accounts use local information on highly “clickable” topics to lure readers into an article and thus increase the click count and value of their advertising space. Businesses in the Chinese ethnic economy, including education and migration agents and real estate companies, also maintain lively and popular WeChat public accounts that offer local information as clickbait to promote brand awareness and customer loyalty. Students may continue to trust the education agents they contracted for their journey to Australia as a source of information after arrival, although the information provided by these agents has been shown at times to be misleading.³⁸ In general, since the provision of local information by WeChat public accounts is governed by a purely commercial logic and is not actively regulated by any local authority, the information provided is of extremely variable quality. Local news—for example, on the prevalence of street crime—is routinely exaggerated by sensationalist WeChat

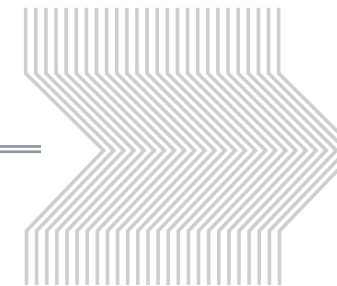
tabloids to generate clicks, with the result that Chinese students may be misinformed about important aspects of local social life (see this report section 5).³⁹ Although this generation of middle-class youth is extremely media-savvy and skilled in judging the credibility of online information in their home environment, when they move overseas they are placed in a much weaker position to ascertain the veracity of such information, hence become vulnerable to misinformation.

In other words, while relevant information may be available to Chinese students somewhere, in some format, it is often not effectively accessible. What is accessible instead is less reliable information from local Chinese-language social media. That Chinese students should turn in the first instance to information in their first language is not surprising: this is a standard behaviour of recent migrant groups, as is recognized in Australian governments’ routine provision of multilingual information for first-generation permanent migrants. Seeking information in one’s first language is all the more understandable in acute or crisis situations when clearly and readily comprehensible information is needed urgently. In-language information is also an important requirement to empower students’ families to understand more about the Australian environment and effectively advise students when necessary. More than once during this study, participants turned to parents back in China for advice on what to do in a crisis situation unfolding in Australia; unsurprisingly, parents were ill-equipped to advise. It is important to recognize the specificity of this group’s informational needs: mainstreaming information provision does not work optimally because Chinese students then simply seek alternative channels that better meet their linguistic and communicative needs.

³⁶ For an overview of WeChat’s operations in Australia, see Sun 2019; Sun 2016.

³⁷ Chang *et al* 2018.

³⁸ State of Victoria, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development, 2008; Baird 2010; Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009; Attorney-General’s Department 2019, *Report of the Migrant Workers’ Taskforce*, Appendix D, “The information needs of vulnerable temporary migrant workers about workplace laws”; Martin 2018, “iPhones and ‘African gangs’”



Recommendations from Section 1: Information provision:

- a. The Government should implement a coordinated national campaign to expand, improve, and make consistent the information available to Chinese international students in Australia, and to enhance its means of delivery. Complete, accessible, timely, consistent and up-to-date information on key aspects of life in Australia should be provided in-language at multiple points, including via digital platforms that can integrate easily with Chinese students’ existing media practices. This should include dedicated WeChat public accounts, but also other platforms popular within this community (EG Yeeyi.com, large commercial WeChat and Weibo accounts, sharable online videos via Youku, Tiktok, etc). For such channels to operate effectively, they must be maintained by communications professionals with a sophisticated grasp of how they function technically, culturally, and socially. Chinese international graduates in Media, Communications and related areas could be employed to manage these channels.
- b. Education providers and state, territory and local governments should work with the Government to promote this validated national-level information stream to Chinese international students, and to develop locally specific information streams tailored to life in particular states and cities.
- c. Search engine optimisation should be used for validated information provided by governments, education providers and associated agencies for international students, to ensure that the highest quality information appears at the top of keyword search results lists. This should be applied to Chinese-language as well as English-language search terms and engines (EG Baidu as well as Google).
- d. The provision of accurate information to Chinese international students by education agents before and after their arrival in Australia should be routinely checked by the education providers with whom the agents are associated, to weed out misinformation. Because there is potential for conflict of interest here, providers’ quality control of information given by agents should be subject to audit by the federal Department of Education.³⁹
- e. Study in Australia could run a regular “Fact check” feature via its WeChat public account to expose misinformation about life in Australia circulating on commercial public accounts.
- f. Relevant agencies including police, health service providers, community legal centres, tenants’ unions, consumer regulators, Ombudsmen, and welfare agencies should maintain an in-language presence via local WeChat public accounts to disseminate information about their services and systems in the Chinese international student community. Public and community organizations should be appropriately resourced by governments to support such in-language digital information initiatives.
- g. The Government should strengthen Australian-end regulatory frameworks for overseeing and improving WeChat public account information provision on local matters, enabling enforceable penalties for the dissemination of false or misleading information.
- h. State government initiatives like the international student hubs in Melbourne ([Study Melbourne Student Centre](#)) and Brisbane ([Brisbane Student Hub](#)) should be expanded and serve as benchmarks for national standard practice. These bricks-and-mortar drop-in centres have a key role to play in information provision alongside digital initiatives.

³⁹ Commonwealth of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009, pp. 99-104.

2

Housing

Problems identified in this section include that Chinese international students:

- Are vulnerable to exploitation by landlords in a context where students know little about local tenancy regulations, tenants' rights, or avenues for redress;
- Are vulnerable to poor treatment in some homestays in a context where students know little about homestayors' rights or avenues for redress.

The Council for International Education, convened in 2016 to oversee Australia's *National Strategy for International Education 2025*, has recognized the vulnerability of international students to exploitation in rental accommodation, including due to poor service and overcrowding.⁴⁰ The 2009 Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students identified related problems, as did a 2016 study commissioned by the City of Sydney.⁴¹ An earlier study conducted in Melbourne identified international students' socio-spatial segregation in geographically concentrated, purpose-build student accommodation as another problem affecting their quality of life and social engagement.⁴² The present study confirms that Chinese international students are affected by all of these housing-related problems. In particular, their exploitation as tenants is exacerbated by their lack of knowledge of applicable laws, tenants' rights, reliable sources of information, and avenues of redress in the case of exploitation.

Under the ESOS National Code, international students below eighteen years of age must stay with an adult relative or nominated carer, or board in a homestay. Commonly, though, upon reaching age eighteen, the students who participated in this

study chose to move out of homestays and into rental apartments or houses shared with other Chinese students. Some boarded with relatives or friends of their families, and a couple lived in apartments owned by their parents. But the vast majority ended up in the private rental market. They lived in a wide range of different types of accommodation depending on their financial situation, with overcrowded rent-a-bunk rooming houses at one extreme (see below), and luxury high-rise apartments at the other.

Especially in the first year or two of their stay, Chinese students' real estate dealings are often confined to the Chinese diasporic community. Many participants in this study organized rental leases prior to arriving in Australia via the Australia-based Chinese-language classifieds site, Yeyi.com, where landlords advertise properties to let and accept bond payments as security in advance of students' arrival. Such arrangements have built-in potential for exploitation, and cautionary tales circulate in the community about students cheated out of money paid for properties that turned out not to exist, by "landlords" who subsequently disappeared. But despite the risks involved, newly arriving students see these informal rental arrangements with Chinese-speaking landlords as preferable to the difficult task of negotiating a rental lease with a real estate agent. Students entering into these informal rental agreements often shared the property with their landlords. Their experiences of these informal arrangements varied widely. Some households became caring and supportive micro-communities for the student renters; other situations resulted in exploitation and acrimony, with the tenants generally being the ones left out of pocket.⁴³ Sometimes, conditions were poorer than advertised but landlords would not allow tenants to break their initial informal agreement to stay for a certain length of time,

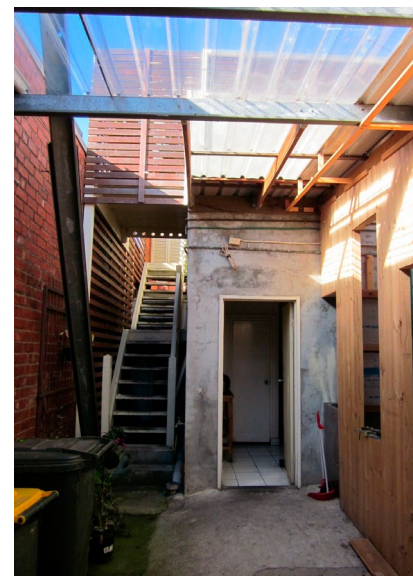


Figure 1: Unsafe extension

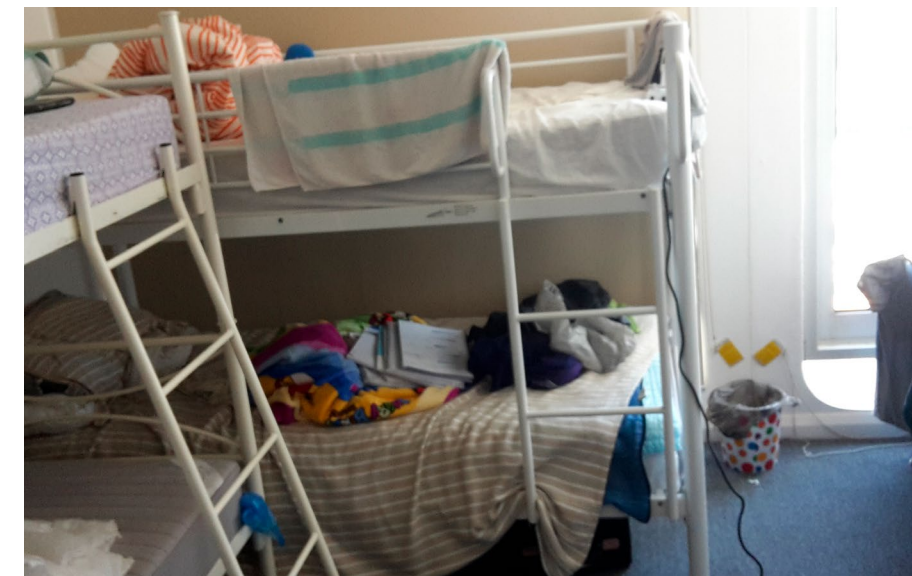


Figure 2: Overcrowded rooming house Photos by the author

or landlords demanded additional payments. Several times, participants contacted the author asking urgently for advice about what to do when landlords with whom they had such informal lease agreements tried to cheat them.

Participants also had a patchy experience with homestays. In some cases, homestay families were warm, caring, and supportive, and provided the foundation for students' growing sense of local belonging. But in other cases, homestays were a negative experience. A few participants reported homestay landlords underfeeding them (one participant lost 5kg in a month on a protein ration of one egg every two weeks!). Others related unhappy stories about overly controlling homestay landlords who made all sorts of unreasonable rules (EG: no eating between meals, no washing underwear separately) and enforced them with pronouncements that had a racist overtone (EG: "this is how we do things in Australia, you'd better get used to it"). Such stories imply that in some cases, as [media reports](#) suggest, the economic motivation for taking in homestay students may outweigh landlords' care for their wellbeing. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that there is at present no national regulatory framework for homestay standards.⁴⁴

Study participants also experienced a range of substandard accommodation conditions, both in terms of basic architectural deficiencies, and in terms of overcrowding. In recent years, significant mainstream [media attention](#) has been paid to the prevalence of "dogbox" apartments and "high-rise slums" where unscrupulous landlords exploit international student tenants. Although in Victoria, [new design guidelines](#) were introduced in 2016 in

response to substandard conditions in many new CBD apartments, many Chinese students continue to occupy apartments that lack basic amenity (EG: bedrooms without windows or ventilation, tiny area). One participant lived for a time in a rooming house illegally constructed behind a suburban tailoring business. The landlord had used basic handyman skills to construct ten bedrooms over two storeys behind the main building, accessed by an unlit rear laneway, which he rented out to Chinese international students for a cash payment of AUD\$100 each per week. There was one open-air "kitchen," one bathroom, and no fire plan [Figure 1].

Another problem concerns over-crowding in standard dwellings. One participant—a mature-age student who had taken out personal loans to enable her to study in Australia and was under significant financial pressure—lived for a time with eleven others in a "rent-a-bunk" apartment in Melbourne's CBD. It was a two-bedroom apartment with two sets of bunk beds crammed into each bedroom and the living room accommodating a further two sets [Figure 2]. It appeared that most of the tenants were East Asian international students, but it was hard to be sure since they mainly did not know each other's names, let alone nationalities or backgrounds. The rent was collected by the landlord's representative, himself one of the tenants, so that most of the tenants did not know the landlord's identity. Other participants lived in similarly overcrowded conditions; for example, a three-bedroom rooming house near a suburban university campus that housed ten Chinese students plus the landlord. Such overcrowded, unlawful and unsafe housing for international students clearly cannot be supported.⁴⁵

40 Council for International Education 2018, *Outcomes of Issues Considered*.

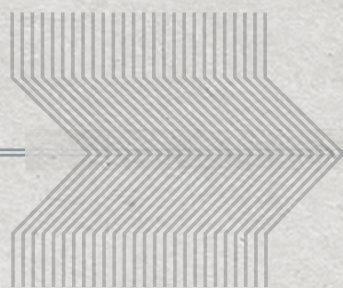
41 Institute of Public Policy and Governance 2016; Commonwealth of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009.

42 Fincher and Shaw 2009.

43 Pejic 2012; State of Victoria, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development 2008.

44 See also Commonwealth of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009.

45 Baird 2010.



Recommendations from Section 2: Housing:

- a. Governments and education providers should provide complete, accessible, timely, consistent and up-to-date information to Chinese international students on:
 - › Relevant federal and state housing laws,
 - › Federal and state laws and regulations on tenants' rights and responsibilities,
 - › Avoiding housing scams and unsafe housing, and
 - › State-specific channels for resolving disputes with landlords and real estate agents.

This information should be provided in-language and at multiple points, including in formats that integrate readily with these students' existing social media practices (EG via WeChat, sharable online videos via Youku, Tiktok, etc). A consistent, state-by-state housing information and resources package could be coordinated through the Student Accommodation Association and promoted to commencing and current students through education providers and the Study in Australia webpage and WeChat account.
- b. State and territory governments should support the provision of free or low-cost multilingual legal advice for international students on protecting their rights as tenants.
- c. The Government should offer incentives for universities to provide affordable, socially integrated international student housing on or near university campuses, including temporary accommodation for recent arrivals. This could ameliorate the effects of socio-spatial segregation in purpose-built commercial accommodation for international students. Provision of temporary accommodation for recent arrivals could mitigate the risks of students entering into informal lease agreements prior to arrival.
- d. Local governments in areas with high concentrations of international students should consider piloting unauthorized housing investigation teams to weed out overcrowded and unsafe accommodation and shut down illegal operators, as was done in the City of Sydney in 2018.⁴⁶
- e. Regulation of mandated industry standards in homestays should be enforced. The Homestay Standards developed by University of Sydney could serve as a basis for national standards.⁴⁷ The Department of Education could facilitate the establishment of a peak body governing homestays, or homestays could be incorporated in a dedicated category within the Student Accommodation Association's National Property Accreditation Scheme.⁴⁸ Regulation of homestay standards should include house inspections and consultation with international students living in homestays.

46 Institute of Public Policy and Governance 2016.

47 Centre for English Teaching 2019.

48 Student Accommodation Association n.d.

3

Social inclusion

Problems identified in this section include that Chinese international students:

- Are poorly served by education courses in which a majority of enrolments are by co-nationals, restricting opportunities to make local and intercultural connections;
- Are subject to social exclusion by domestic students;
- Are subject to anti-Chinese racism in Australian cities;
- Feel disrespected by some public discussions in Australia about Chinese international students that are perceived to silence their own voices and points of view.

The Government's *National Strategy for International Education 2025* recognizes the importance for the international student experience of international students' engagement with Australian communities, and commits to developing best practice approaches for connecting these students with local Australian communities. When planning their journeys to Australia, Chinese students look forward to the chance to make local friends and become part of Australian communities. Interviews conducted with future students in China reveal that excitement about the opportunity to make cross-cultural connections while studying in Australia was shared by almost all, though this was sometimes mixed with anxiety about whether local peers would welcome their friendship.

After the students arrived in Australia, the results of their attempts to realize their hopes of social inclusion were mixed. The most naturally extroverted of the group made a wide range of friends of various nationalities early on, including domestic and other international students. They pro-actively joined university clubs and societies and community social and hobby groups, and engaged in community volunteering activities.

49 All names are pseudonyms, quotes have been translated by the author.

LOOKING FORWARD TO CROSS-CULTURAL FRIENDSHIPS

I'm half-excited, half-anxious. The good part is that I'll definitely meet lots more people. The anxious part is about whether I'll be able to integrate into the lifestyle over there.

– Xiaoqing, 20, Shanghai⁴⁹

I want to try out the lifestyle there, I mean expand my horizons, make lots of new friends, friends from different countries. [...] I want to try out a new way of life in a new environment.

– Jiale, 18, Guangdong

Going abroad for study is not just about the professional training you receive. [...] It's also about developing certain abilities, especially the ability to cope in a foreign environment and quickly be able to adapt to it, quickly make local friends. [...] Actually, many abilities [...] including how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds.

– Yining, 22, Anhui

L: Overseas, you can broaden your horizons, and exercise your independence better. And you can make lots of good foreign friends. So I think it's more meaningful than going to university in China.

X: Going overseas for university means you can learn knowledge that is not available in China, and you'll develop the ability to be independent, and you can make friends from lots of different places.

– friends Liangliang and Xiaoshu, both 18, Henan

I think I'll feel more at ease in that environment. [...] You have to be independent, and learn how to integrate into the social environment with those around you. Over there they emphasise diversity. [...] I really want to experience that kind of diversity.

– Zhenghui, 21, Chongqing

I do hope [to make friends with local students]. But I don't know whether I might face difficulties, I mean, whether they will accept us Chinese international students--will they?

– Qiqi, 20, Guangdong

This subgroup clearly and consciously benefitted from the cultural enrichment this diverse friendship group brought. However, such natural extroverts comprised only about 10 to 15% of the total, as one would expect in any group. The others found it difficult to break into local friendship circles, often felt socially excluded by Australian peers, and experienced this failure to realize their hopes of social inclusion as a major disappointment of their time in Australia. At the conclusion of their studies, many framed this as a failure to “integrate into local society.” They linked this with a number of factors that affected their lives both in and out of the classroom:

- Chinese students’ concentration in particular masters level courses where they reportedly constituted 80%–90% of enrolments, making it a logistical challenge to meet local peers;
- the everyday effects of cultural differences: different food preferences, media culture, topics of conversation, cultural reference points, socializing habits, and norms of interpersonal communication and relationships;
- their own lack of confidence in their English ability plus local peers’ perceived impatience with their tentative attempts at conversation;
- perceived prejudice on the part of some academic staff, who they felt held stereotyped views about Chinese students (EG: as cheaters or plagiarists) and/or did not respect their attempts to contribute to classroom discussions;
- Sinophobic attitudes they perceived among domestic peers who they felt were influenced by Australian media and government spokespeople (EG: complaints that Chinese investors were driving up Australian property prices, offhand “jokes” about Chinese students being CCP spies);

- A spectrum ranging from indifference to overt anti-Chinese racism on the part of some local students (EG: domestic students’ lack of interest in extending friendships beyond the classroom, anti-Chinese graffiti in university toilets, local students refusing to share a table with Chinese students in class, bullying in student accommodation);
- Large numbers and high concentrations of Chinese students in metropolitan areas making it too easy to take the path of least resistance and socialize mainly with co-nationals.

REJECTED BY AUSTRALIAN PEERS

Yaling was studying in Canberra and initially lived in on-campus student accommodation. When after three years of study in Australia she was asked about her sense of belonging here, she described her experience of being bullied by a domestic dorm-mate who spread lies about the Chinese students’ behaviour to the dorm administration, to the point where Yaling and her friends chose to move out.

I think that the locals here strongly reject us [...]. [Now] my preference [...] is to live with Chinese people. I felt like [the locals’] rejection of us is much stronger than our rejection of them. [...] We tried, but I feel like they refuse to let you integrate with them. [...] So I guess it’s about a sense of belonging. [...] If this place gave you a strong sense of belonging, then maybe your feelings for it would become stronger than your feelings for China. [...] So I think you have to look at the country [Australia] itself, at how tolerant it is.

This study’s finding that one of Chinese students’ main disappointments with their Australian experience is the impossibility of realizing their initial hopes of developing intercultural friendships echoes much other research in the field, which has raised similar concerns about these students’ social exclusion.⁵⁰ The Government’s own data reveals that Chinese students’ satisfaction with opportunities to interact with Australians is almost 10% lower than for other international students.⁵¹ Lack of opportunities to develop intercultural friendships diminishes the quality of the study experience for both local and international students,⁵² and directly impacts on international students’ opportunity to advance their English language capacity while in Australia.⁵³

The researchers who developed i-graduate’s International Student Barometer tool for measuring student satisfaction observe, with specific reference to high concentrations of PRC students in some courses, that:

integration [across nationalities] tends to be inhibited when any nationality is dominant. [...] Enrolling 30-70% of international undergraduates from one country undermines the notion of an internationalized student body that most institutions tout as a benefit of studying abroad, and a benefit for domestic students.⁵⁴

Concentration of Chinese students in particular courses—which are sometimes designed from the outset with the express goal of attracting these students and the fee income they bring—is clearly one significant issue affecting the quality of these students’ Australian education experience. Others include the tendency of both domestic and international student groups to self-segregate in the classroom in the absence of intervention by teaching staff; an apparent lack of cross-cultural communication skills and understanding on the part of some domestic students and teaching staff that may hinder them from relating effectively to Chinese students; and Chinese students’ structural lack of accessible opportunities to meet and socialise with local peers outside class.

POLITICS IN THE CLASSROOM

Over the past few years, Australian media have run multiple stories about Chinese international students’ political engagements and loyalties. Reports have highlighted perceptions about these students’ brainwashing by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), their alleged roles as CCP spies, and concerns about their political influence on campus and purported threat to free speech.⁵⁵

Allegations about interference by any foreign government in Australian universities and society are serious and must be appropriately investigated. However, much of the reporting on these questions has been based on a handful of cases that involve a tiny minority of students. The overwhelming majority of Chinese students are private individuals unconnected with the CCP, and have no role in espionage nor any desire or motivation to curtail free speech on campus or otherwise influence Australian society and politics. The findings of the present study suggest that while some Chinese students do have a strong moral sense of their duty to verbally defend China from insult by outsiders, and a deep emotional attachment to China’s culture and people, this does not equate to mindless loyalty to any specific governing regime, political party, or leader. Indeed, the vast majority of study participants saw themselves as rather apolitical, and some parents expressly forbade them from engaging in political activities of any kind—including pro-China activities—while living abroad, since such activities were considered risky.

In this context, widely publicized allegations by Australian media and the Government that Chinese students in general are involved in political interference have adversely affected how university staff,

50 Wang and Cross 2005; State of Victoria, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development, 2008; City of Melbourne 2010; Baird 2010; Graycar 2010; Zhao 2016; Commonwealth of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009

51 Gill and Jakobson 2017, citing unpublished data from a 2014 government survey.

52 McKenzie and Baldassar 2016.

53 Schumann 1986

54 Garrett 2014, pp. 26-27.

55 Gill and Jakobson 2017; Laurenceson 2017; Martin 2018. “How Chinese Students Exercise Free Speech Abroad.”

domestic students, and the community at large view these students, as well as how the Chinese students perceive Australian attitudes toward them. The net effect has been to create a gulf of mistrust between Chinese students and the wider community, and to undermine their sense of belonging in Australia.

This can be seen in one participant's reflections on the effects of media reporting of then-Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop's "blunt warning" to Chinese students regarding their supposed threats to free speech on Australian university campuses.⁵⁶ The ABC's Four Corners program had alleged that students' pro-China political activities on campus were orchestrated by Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) under the guidance of the Chinese Embassy and the CCP.⁵⁷ Mingyu was studying in Canberra at the time, and had friends in the CSSA who were ordinary undergraduate students with no interest in politics. She reflected:

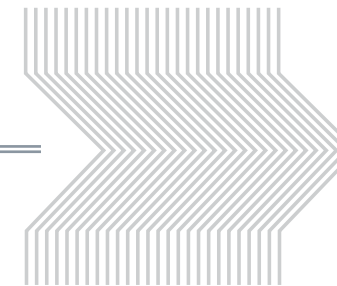
The media was constantly targeting [...] the Canberra CSSA. [...] My friend [in the club] said that [...] people from all the other clubs kept pointing at them and saying, "Isn't what you're doing a bit suspicious, aren't you spies?" and whatever. I actually think that the mainstream media in Australia didn't handle it very [well], they manipulated the debate just like the media in China do. I think there's also that kind of media here, the kind that are influenced by politicians.

They had no evidence, so why did they have to say that stuff? I used to think that in the west [there was] freedom of speech, but actually [...] it might be that [the media] intentionally wanted to stir things up because of something to do with Australia-China relations. [...] I don't think it's really so democratic here.

This example illustrates how in this instance, Australian university campuses became the focus for a reductive and polarizing public debate that created among Chinese students the defensive psychology of a besieged minority. This shattered the belief of some in Australia as a place of free speech, freedom of the press, and democratic values.

However, if they can resist the kind of simplistic and divisive thinking that characterized that debate, Australian universities are in fact uniquely positioned to become a solution to such an impasse. With their tradition of reasoned, research-based analysis, critical thinking, and fair and rational discussion, universities have the potential to be at the forefront of advancing communication between different student groups to build a more cosmopolitan outlook. Handled sensitively by staff trained in facilitating productive interactions in the internationalized classroom, the differences of opinion that in recent years have sparked conflicts between Chinese and domestic students could serve instead as an impetus toward enriching all students' understanding of their world through appreciation of diverse perspectives, critical self-reflection, and mutually transformative learning.

⁵⁶ Bishop 2017.
⁵⁷ ABC 2017.



Recommendations from Section 3: Social Inclusion:

- a. Education providers should limit courses geared specifically toward attracting any one specific nationality of international students and whose enrolments exceed 50% of any particular nationality of international students.
- b. The Department of Education should establish standard international student social inclusion policies and best practice guidelines for higher education providers nationally.
- c. Education providers should provide resources for the establishment of more structured cross-cultural exchange clubs and activities, both during O Week and throughout the academic year. These could include social mixers, cross-group peer mentorship or buddy programs, mixed-group volunteering activities on campus or in the community, et cetera. There is a strong correlation between organized social activities and the likelihood of international students recommending their university to others.⁵⁸ Such activities could be funded by diverting a proportion of fee revenue derived from international student fee income. A minimum scope of engagement between domestic and international students in such activities should be specified as an aspect of best practice.⁵⁹
- d. Education providers should invest in high-quality staff training for optimally managing the internationalized classroom by building in effective domestic-international mixing. This should provide staff with relevant skills in intercultural competency and cross-cultural communication, including managing potentially sensitive debates in the internationalized classroom.
- e. Education providers should provide training for all students in the first semester of courses about the educational, professional, and personal value of making intercultural connections.
- f. In collaboration with local government and community agencies, education providers should develop and disseminate to international students city-specific, multilingual registers of community volunteering opportunities.
- g. The Government should develop ways of educating the general public about the positive contributions that international students make to the community and economy.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Garrett 2014, p. 20.

⁵⁹ Gill and Jakobson 2017, p. 4

⁶⁰ State of Victoria, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development 2008.



4

Work

Problems identified in this section include that Chinese international students:

- Are vulnerable to exploitation by employers in a context where students know little about Australian workplace laws, workers' rights and avenues for redress;
- Are vulnerable to discrimination by employers based on visa status;
- Are vulnerable to the unlawful monetization of internship and employment opportunities by commercial operators.

The widespread workplace exploitation of international students in Australia has become common knowledge in recent years thanks to a series of [media investigations](#), including revelations during 2015 about systematic wage theft affecting international students and other migrant workers in [7-Eleven franchises](#). Such exploitation runs fundamentally contrary to national laws and values. Furthermore, as the Migrant Workers' Taskforce underlined in 2019, "Wage exploitation of temporary migrants [...] has the potential to undermine our international reputation as a place for international students to undertake their studies."⁶¹

International students' vulnerability to workplace exploitation has been recognized in a range of recent government actions. In the wake of the 7-Eleven exposé, in November 2018, the government's Council for International Education (CIE), chaired by the Hon. Dan Tehan, Minister for Education and Training, endorsed a package of actions on student workplace exploitation.⁶² The package's eleven actions detail education providers' and governments' responsibilities to

address awareness, prevention, early intervention and redress of work exploitation among international students. These include:

- › education providers' responsibility, in cooperation with government agencies and the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO), to provide international students with timely and accurate information to reduce their vulnerability to workplace exploitation;
- › education providers' responsibility to ensure that education agents are providing such information to prospective students;
- › the Government's responsibility to develop culturally appropriate materials to communicate such information to both education agents and students;
- › education providers' responsibility to eliminate on-campus workplace exploitation;
- › education providers', peak bodies', and the Government's responsibility to develop best-practice guidance materials on supporting international students to access appropriate support services if they experience workplace exploitation;
- › education providers' responsibility to facilitate the FWO to educate support staff and international students on workplace exploitation and entitlements in Australian workplaces;
- › government agencies', peak bodies', and state and territory governments' responsibility to support the development of international student hubs as a channel for the provision of relevant work-related information.

61 Attorney-General's Department 2019, *Report of the Migrant Workers' Taskforce*, p. 6.

62 Council for International Education (Expert Members) 2018.

The Government also established the Migrant Workers' Taskforce (MWT) to develop ways to prevent the underpayment of migrant workers including international students. As well as recommending that relevant legislation be amended to clarify the entitlements of migrant workers and increase employer penalties for worker exploitation, the MWT focused on the importance of effective information delivery and education, and endorsed a whole of government approach to address migrant workers' needs in these regards. Its recommendations emphasise the need to deliver accessible, personalized, relevant and timely information, particularly in-language and including through social media channels and behavioural approaches (EG regular "nudge" notifications). With specific regard to international students, the MWT reiterated the CIE's recommendations that education providers should regularly provide these students with information on workplace rights, and assist those experiencing workplace exploitation. It also recommended that the CIE develop best practice guidelines for education providers in these regards. In March 2019, the government accepted in principle all of the MWT's 22 recommendations.⁶³

The vulnerability of international students to workplace exploitation is a problem that has been addressed in multiple investigations over a number of years by the Federal Government, university researchers, and local governments.⁶⁴ The findings of the present study confirm previous research findings, revealing that Chinese international students are widely exploited in Australian workplaces, including through wage theft in unskilled and semiskilled work and through exclusion from professional opportunities in skilled work. This section supports the existing recommendations by the CIE and the MWT outlined above, and supplements these with more detailed information about the working

experiences of Chinese students as a specific group, and suggestions for optimal methods of delivering information to this group.

Work during study

Under the ESOS National Code, international students are currently permitted to work 40 hours per fortnight when a course is in session. Many Chinese students take up this opportunity and seek casual or part-time jobs while studying. Given the relatively secure financial situation of most Chinese international students, their desire to work while studying in Australia is generally not motivated by stark economic need. Family remittances, rather than paid work, are their main financial support. Instead, these students hope that working could ease the financial burden on their parents by covering some of their daily expenses, provide them with a deeper understanding of Australian culture and society and, ideally, enhance their professional experience in an area connected with their studies. Before they arrived in Australia, many participants in this study emphasised their hope that working in local businesses in Australia would help them develop job-relevant skills, including enhanced English language capacity.

The reality for Chinese international students seeking part-time work in Australian cities is rather different. While participants in this study initially hoped they could find work in businesses where English was the dominant workplace language, they found that in practice non-Chinese employers were often reluctant to hire them. For example, Yining applied for jobs in two major fast-food franchises, about which she was never contacted after submitting her applications. She mused:

I'm actually not very clear about why. Because I personally think that among Chinese [students], my English is comparatively good. But maybe when a lot of people see you have a Chinese name, they're not willing [to hire you]. [...] It's not [open] prejudice. They just, very politely, reject your resumé.

Such stories were common, and anti-Chinese racism in Australian employment markets has been corroborated by statistical studies.⁶⁵ Another participant told the story of a friend who was a qualified barista and sought work in an Italian-style café in Melbourne but was advised by the owner that employees with "Asian faces" were not suitable for the position.

Given this apparently race-based exclusion, many Chinese students have no option but to settle for casual unskilled work in the Chinese diasporic economy, where connections are facilitated by shared ethnic background. Mandarin is often the dominant language in these workplaces, and while this sort of work connects students into local Chinese diasporic communities, it does not offer them the wider type of social connectedness they have hoped for.

Many participants found work in restaurants and real estate companies run by members of the Chinese diasporic community. While racism is not often a problem in such situations, wage exploitation is endemic.⁶⁶ At the time of writing, the standard hourly rate of pay in Chinese-run restaurants in Melbourne is \$10-\$12, with some starting wages of \$8 or less: significantly below the legal minimum wage for this type of casual work. Many employers in these restaurants:

- › enforce unpaid and sometimes lengthy "trial" periods;
- › do not offer written employment contracts;
- › do not apply overtime or penalty rates;
- › pay cash-in-hand with no payslips;
- › do not record employees' Tax File Numbers; and
- › ignore the student visa condition that students may work only 40 hours per fortnight during semester.⁶⁷

In the real estate sector, meanwhile, unqualified student-workers are often unlawfully employed part-time on a commission-only basis, meaning that they receive no payment at all for hours worked until they sell a property.

Participants explained that employers feel licensed to ignore Australian regulations because the assumption, on both sides, is that this is "black labour": work done outside legal frameworks. The employers know that they are guilty of wage theft and the student-workers assume that they themselves are guilty of tax avoidance, so neither side is inclined to report the other to authorities. Petty deception, breaking of verbal contracts, and short-changing by employers is common. One employer demanded a \$200 "bond" up-front as a condition of the student being given a waitressing job, which was very difficult to reclaim when the student later resigned; other participants told of employers refusing to pay wages owed or tricking them out of promised payments for specific tasks.

Yet despite their knowledge of their own exploitation, no student who participated in this study nor anyone else they knew in the Chinese international student community ever sought redress through formal channels. Reasons they gave included:

⁶³ Attorney-General's Department 2019, *Australian Government Response*.

⁶⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009; Marginson *et al* 2010, Chapter 6; Council for International Education 2018, *Meeting of the Council and Outcomes of Issues*; Reilly *et al* 2017; Berg and Farbenblum 2017; Institute of Public Policy and Governance 2016; Clibborn 2018.

⁶⁵ Booth, Leigh and Varganova showed that a person with a Chinese name would need to submit 68% more applications than someone with an Anglo name in order to get the same number of responses, making Chinese applicants the most discriminated against of all ethnic groups studied (2012, p. 558).

⁶⁶ Monani and Jakubowicz 2010.

⁶⁷ See also Clibborn and Wright 2018; Berg and Farbenblum 2017.

- › lack of knowledge of how to seek redress;
- › the difficulty of negotiating Australia’s legal system;
- › the fear of becoming unemployable in a tight-knit community where word gets around;
- › a sense of loyalty toward employers who in other respects took on a mentoring role;
- › reluctance, which participants interpreted as culturally specific, to challenge authority;
- › the assumption, also interpreted as culturally specific, that it is normal for bosses to exploit workers;
- › the idea that compared to wages in China, \$10 per hour is a reasonable wage; and
- › the futility of trying to improve working conditions when, by the time any such improvements were made, the international student-workers would no longer be around to enjoy them.

All in all, participants’ situation vis-à-vis casual and part-time work undertaken during study strongly confirms the conclusions of Marginson and co-authors that international student workers occupy a highly marginalized zone in Australia, segregated into low-status work in small businesses, often trapped in exploitative or illegal conditions, and forced into a narrower range of jobs than local students.⁶⁸

Work after study

Temporary Graduate visas that confer post-study work rights are available to foreign graduates of Australian universities, and are usually valid for eighteen months or two years. These visas are a significant drawcard used by governments, education providers and education agents to market Australian degrees to prospective students abroad. Many participants interviewed before arrival cited the opportunity to obtain professional experience in Australia as a factor behind their

decision to study here. This echoes responses to the International Student Survey in 2012, which found that 81.9% of respondents from China rated the chance to work after study as important or very important in their choice of Australia as a study destination.⁶⁹

However, graduates quickly found that many Australian employers refused to accept job applicants (or even interns) who held Temporary Graduate or Bridging visas.⁷⁰ Participants in the Accounting and Finance fields frequently reported that employers, including some of the large international accounting firms and the major Australian banks, specified permanent residency (PR) or citizenship as a condition of application. One participant even recalled that a representative of one of the big banks had been invited to give a talk on job-seeking to the graduating class at her Go8 university—of which a large majority were students from China—only to reveal, when questioned, that most of her audience would be ineligible to apply for work in her sector due to their visa status. Many other professional employers insisted on local work experience as a prerequisite for being offered local work.

The struggle that Chinese graduates like Mingxi reported in finding professional work is echoed in research on international graduates’ employability conducted by Hobsons Australia in partnership with the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) in 2016. That study found that Australian employers are not sufficiently aware of the value that international students can bring to the workplace.⁷¹ Chinese graduates’ particular difficulties in finding professional employment are also reflected in figures cited in another recent report, *Economic Opportunities and Outcomes of Post-Study Work Rights in Australia*, commissioned by the IEAA. Derived from data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, figures presented in that report indicate that Temporary Graduate visa holders from China have the lowest rates of fulltime employment and the highest rates of being unemployed and seeking work of any nationality surveyed.⁷² All of this illustrates that remaining in Australia after graduation poses the

risk to Chinese graduates of becoming downwardly mobile, despite their Australian degrees.

Those few research participants who did manage to secure professional work in Australia after graduation (often only after gaining PR) worked in a variety of local companies and institutions, most with a majority of Australian-born staff. Becoming part of the everyday world of these workplaces often represented a turning-point in participants’ sense of social inclusion. This highlights the importance of finding ways to extend such opportunities to a greater proportion of international graduates, including those on Temporary Graduate and Bridging visas. As is underlined in the 2019 IEAA report, suboptimal labour market outcomes for temporary graduate visa holders also have wider implications for Australia’s economy. These include wasting the potential productivity and participation benefits of this well-educated and internationally connected cohort of graduates, increasing competition for Australians seeking low-skilled entry-level jobs, and eroding the attractiveness of the post study work rights scheme for prospective international students.⁷³

Another issue that emerged forcefully from the present study was the monetization of professional work and training opportunities by commercial agents. An increasing proportion of students’ engagements with Australian agencies is now mediated by agents, from education agents’ mediation of students’ enrolment, to migration agents’ assistance in gathering points toward graduates’ applications for PR, to employment consultants’ mediation of graduates’ search for local internships and job placements. Participants reported that Chinese international graduates they knew had paid various fees, ranging from AUD\$1,500 to \$20,000, to purchase internships and job placements. These temporary positions were often unremunerated. Chinese-language advertisements for such services circulated via WeChat and other social media channels promise access to professional consultants, job-related training, CV editing services, internships, and local work experience. While a permanent position at the conclusion of such services is not guaranteed, ads sometimes make questionable claims about the likelihood of the purchase of

these services leading to permanent work in Australia. The brokering of for-fee internships and professional job placements to Chinese international student graduates is undertaken by migration agents, combined education-migration agents, and professional coaching and employment consultancy companies. This lends weight to the recommendation arising from the Australian Parliament’s recent investigation into the regulation of migration agents, that further review of the registration and activities of these agents may be required.⁷⁴

THE AUSTRALIAN JOB MARKET’S BAMBOO CEILING

My good friend has her heart set on staying [in Australia]. Recently she’s been constantly looking for work, and no matter where she looks, it’s basically always the same few types available, either in retail sales or waitressing. She finally found something in real estate, but the agency told her there’s no wage, you just have to work for us until you manage to sell a property, and only after that will they pay you a wage. [...] She worked there for half a semester and didn’t get paid a cent, just did the work for them. In the end she stopped doing it. It makes me think it’s pretty hard for people like us to find work. Now she’s found a job in retail sales for Ugg [boots], but the pay is just twelve bucks [an hour]. [...] I think it ought to be at least eighteen, that’s the minimum wage. These days most jobs are like that [IE underpaid] [...]. The people I know—including those who’ve already immigrated and got PR—are all working either in international education, or in real estate, or as tour guides. I feel like that type of work can’t really—I mean, you can’t just stay here and do that your whole life.

--Mingxi, who graduated with an Australian masters degree in Accounting but chose to return to China to seek work

68 Marginson *et al* 2010, p. 142.

69 Cited in Chew 2019, p. 12.

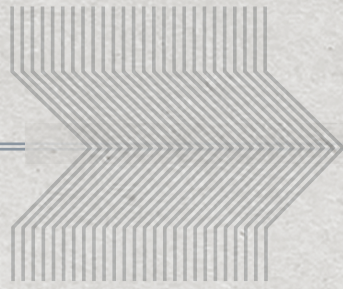
70 Robertson 2013, p. 95.

71 Hobsons Solutions 2016.

72 Chew 2019, p. 44. On Australian employers’ reluctance to hire international student graduates, see also Hobsons Solutions 2016.

73 Chew 2019, pp. 6-11.

74 Commonwealth of Australia 2019.



Recommendations from Section 4: Work:

- a. When developing and disseminating materials to inform Chinese international students about work-related matters (EG taxation, work rights and entitlements, workplace exploitation, avenues for redress), Australian governments, education providers, and the FWO should ensure that this information is provided in-language and in formats that integrate readily with these students' existing social media practices (EG regular reminders via WeChat public accounts, sharable online in-language videos via Youku, Tiktok, etc).
- b. The Government should provide appropriate resources to allow the FWO to establish a dedicated contact team for international student-workers, including staff with capacity to work in-language.⁷⁵
- c. The Government should consider whether the FWO needs additional powers, especially in relation to its enforcement functions and obtaining redress for exploited workers.⁷⁶
- d. State and territory governments should support the provision of free or low-cost legal advice to international students on protecting their rights at work (EG on the model of the recently established [Migrant Employment Legal Service](#) in NSW).
- e. The Government should develop and disseminate education for employers about the rights and entitlements of international student workers and the penalties for worker exploitation (including in-language), and the benefits of employing international graduates in professional roles.
- f. The Government should review the legal basis for discrimination by employers based on job applicants' status as holders of Temporary Graduate or Bridging visas.
- g. Education providers and local governments should expand efforts to assist international students and graduates to obtain work integrated learning and workplace based learning opportunities.
- h. The Government should establish a means of more effectively regulating the activities of migration agents, education agents and education coaches and consultants, including those working within CALD communities, to curtail the unlawful sale of internship and employment opportunities to international graduates.

⁷⁵ This reiterates a recommendation made by the FWO itself. See Commonwealth Ombudsman 2020 and City of Melbourne 2010.

⁷⁶ This reiterates a recommendation made by the MWT. See Attorney-General's Department 2019, *Report of the Migrant Workers' Taskforce*, p. 10.

5

Safety and police

Problems identified in this section include that Chinese international students:

- May have culturally specific understandings of police functions and powers, leading to challenges in engaging with Australian police;
- May find public messaging by Australian police inaccessible as a result of police's inability to communicate in-language and via relevant platforms;
- Are vulnerable to misinformation about local crime circulating in in-language social media.

The image of Australia as a safe place to live and study is regularly emphasised by education providers and agents to prospective students' families in China. Favourable comparison with high rates of gun-related crime in the USA and emphasis on the inter-ethnic harmony of Australia's multicultural society, which purportedly makes anti-Chinese racism a rarity, are standard fare in pre-departure information provided to students. Australia's associations with personal safety, a peaceful lifestyle, and harmoniously diverse communities are a significant drawcard across international student groups.⁷⁷

While most Chinese international students who study in Australia do not become victims of crime, for those who do, a number of issues may arise. First, as one would expect, these young people have little pre-existing understanding of Australian police functions, powers and processes; an issue that is exacerbated by significant differences between Australian and Chinese police cultures and systems. Second, despite the best efforts

of some individual police officers and divisions, Chinese students generally lack the opportunity to be educated effectively about Australian police and hence to develop trust in them. Third and related to these two points, when these students do become victims of crime, they may have negative experiences of interactions with police based on a mismatch between their expectations and the reality of police's role and powers. Some may also perceive police as possibly prejudiced against non-citizens and/ or Chinese people. Chinese students' experiences in this regard closely echo the findings of a study undertaken in 2010 with largely South Asian international students in the aftermath of the 2009 attacks on Indian students, which found that:

There is a gap between what some international students expect of the police and what police themselves understand their role to be. Some international students said they did not feel the police were helpful or effective enough, and some also felt that some police at times displayed ethnic or racial bias.⁷⁸

In seeking to understand this situation, it is relevant to consider the distinct cultures, institutional structures, functions and public understandings of police in China compared with Australia. In the cities where most Chinese international students have grown up, police—including officers at local police stations, traffic police, and patrol officers—are a deeply integrated presence in neighbourhood communities. Rather than only being responsible for law enforcement, they are also charged with various public-educational and crime prevention functions. Police are seen as comprehensive enforcers and managers of public security and social order and have a far wider range of functions and discretion than police in Australia. For example, Chinese

⁷⁷ Hobsons Solutions 2017.

⁷⁸ Babacan et al 2010, p. 4.; Marginson et al 2010, p. 104.

police are empowered to administer punishments, such as warnings and fines, and administrative coercive sanctions, including administrative detention. In addition, they can enforce mediation between parties involved in disputes, which is aimed at pragmatic problem-solving.⁷⁹ The scope of police social service work is also extremely broad. China's 1995 Police Law stipulates, for example, that "the police (1) shall offer immediate help when citizens encounter personal safety and property infringement or any other dangers; (2) shall assist citizens in settling disputes on request; (3) shall expeditiously investigate cases reported by citizens; and (4) shall actively participate in rescue and relief operations and in other social welfare work."⁸⁰ In the face of rising urban crime rates in recent decades, there is widespread public support—especially among the privileged classes to which international students' families generally belong—for "tough" crime control through crackdown campaigns, law enforcement, and harsh penalties for criminals.⁸¹ There are also generally high levels of trust in police, again particularly within the better-off social strata of urban residents.⁸²

When studying in Australia, international students may be vulnerable to becoming victims of crime due to unfamiliarity with the local environment, lack of family and social support networks, lack of access to private transportation, and attacks motivated by perceived race and/or international student status.⁸³ Encouraged by the idealized picture painted by education agents and providers, some may perceive Australia as a wealthy, peaceful and therefore low-crime society, and so relax their vigilance around personal safety.⁸⁴ International students may also fall victim to crimes including fraud, wage theft and others perpetrated by people within their local diasporic communities (see this report section 4).⁸⁵ Studies have shown that international students also tend to *feel* less safe than domestic students in the public spaces of Australian cities, and that students of colour are aware that racism may be an element when they become victims of violent crimes like assault.⁸⁶

This last point is certainly reflected in the findings of the present study, in which a majority of the (all

female) core participants at some stage expressed reluctance to venture out after dark in the city, especially when travelling alone. Many also expressed fear of local teenagers, particularly when encountered in groups. Moreover, participants' collective fear of becoming the victims of assault, robbery and other street crime noticeably increased over the four-year duration of the fieldwork study. Participants attributed this to their sense of worsening crime rates, based largely on sensationalized reports circulated in local WeChat public accounts. These reports often focus on ethnically Chinese people as the victims of violent crime which, it may be stated or hinted, is racially motivated.⁸⁷ Regularly reading about and seeing images of people of one's own ethnicity who have suffered assault, robbery, injury, and even murder in the place where one is studying obviously leads to a pervasive sense of personal insecurity. As Yixin, who herself worked as a writer at a local WeChat news account, put it:

Recently a lot of things happened in the city. I feel it's not that safe. [...] The terrorists and the criminals, violence, happen all the time. I never came across [it] in person. But because I'm working for the media, so I am writing about this [kind of] news all day, like [headlines that say] "ZHENJING!" [SHOCK!]. [laughs] All the time it's just like they're trying to [convey] this kind of stress to the public. [...] Chinese[-language] media do [it] all the time. So people think like maybe right now it's not the safest in [the] CBD in Melbourne. [...] [My editor] thinks that's the things people pay attention to. [...] But actually if you emphasise it over and over again, it becomes a bubble.

The wild circulation of such clickbait stories about assaults, robberies and violent crimes, especially those involving ethnically Chinese victims, creates panics that are largely invisible to the wider community. This results in a generalized sense of insecurity both in Chinese student communities

in Australia and among parents back home, who read the same WeChat reports about the locations where their children are studying.

Statistics from the Australian Institute of Criminology suggest that international students experience physical assault at lower rates than the Australian general population, and other theft at about the same rate, but fall victim to robbery at a higher rate.⁸⁸ In recent years, several high-profile cases involving Chinese international students as victims of robbery, aggravated burglary and assault have been widely reported on WeChat public accounts. These include a series of phone robberies in inner northern Melbourne during 2016 (see box below); a violent home invasion involving three Chinese students in Ormond, Melbourne, also in 2016; a spate of violent muggings of Chinese students in Bundoora, Melbourne during 2017; a violent assault on three Chinese international high school students in [Woden, ACT](#) that same year; and a series of violent muggings of Chinese students near Monash university in [Melbourne during 2019](#).

While Chinese students who become victims of crime in Australia may feel that local police cannot do enough to help them, in fact similar frustrations with local police responses have also been found among crime victims within China.⁸⁹ This suggests that such frustration may, in part, simply be a common reaction to becoming the victim of a crime. Nevertheless, Chinese students' sense of disempowerment in relation to Australian police is exacerbated by:

- › Students' lack of understanding of Australian police processes and the logic underlying them;
- › Police's lack of capacity to use appropriate channels to communicate effectively with the Chinese international student community;
- › Questionable and sometimes inflammatory information about local crime circulated via commercial Chinese-language social media;
- › Students' general sense of vulnerability arising from living in a foreign culture far from the social supports of home;
- › Other experiences of racial discrimination in Australian society predisposing some students to interpret police responses through the lens of anti-Chinese racism.

CHINESE STUDENTS, CRIME, POLICE AND WECHAT

One series of incidents that set off a WeChat-mediated crime panic occurred in the first half of 2016, when a spate of iPhone robberies occurred in an area concentrated in inner-northern Melbourne, close to two major university campuses and home to thousands of Chinese international students. Many of these students were mugged while walking in the street or waiting for trams, and influential WeChat public accounts promoted the idea that Chinese students were being racially targeted by the criminals—although police statistics suggested that only one-third of victims were of Asian heritage. Many of those whose phones were stolen reported the thefts to Victoria Police, and in collaboration with the Chinese consulate and the University of Melbourne, the Melbourne North police precinct organized an information session for Chinese students at the university, and encouraged members of the Chinese student community to translate and disseminate police messaging about the robberies.

However, despite police's desire to engage the Chinese student community, because they lacked the capacity to communicate directly in-language and through relevant social media channels, sensationalized WeChat news reporting overwhelmed the police messaging. Panicked messages flooded in from students' friends and relatives in China who were reading the same online accounts of events as they unfolded in real-time. Much of the community discussion of Chinese students' experiences focussed on their disenchantment with police who seemed ineffectual or indifferent. Simply taking reports from victims of the muggings, police appeared to "do nothing" because they could not return the stolen property or quickly find and detain those responsible. Some speculated that there might be a racial element to white police officers' perceived indifference to the situation of Chinese students. Other comments implied that it might be pointless to report robberies to the police, since doing so resulted in no tangible outcome.

These events left Melbourne's Chinese student community feeling shaken and vulnerable. They strongly impacted students' sense of personal security in the CBD and led many to avoid going out at night for several months or even years afterwards, which significantly detracted from their quality of life.

80 Jiao 2001.

80 Police Law 1995, quoted in Wang and Wong 2012, p. 43.

81 Wang & Wong 2012

82 Wu and Sun 2009.

83 Babacan *et al* 2010, Commonwealth of Australia, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee 2009; Marginson *et al* 2010, Chapter 9.

84 Forbes-Mewett *et al* 2015, p. 48.

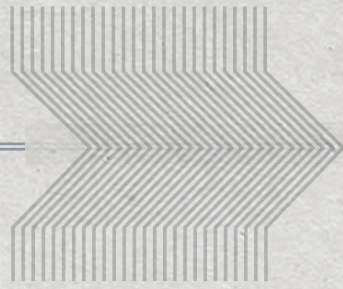
85 Ibid., p. 61

86 Ibid., p. 44, and Babacan *et al* 2010.

87 Martin 2018, "iPhones and 'African gangs'"

88 Forbes-Mewett, *et al* 2015, p. 46. These statistics are likely to be incomplete due to under-reporting and other factors.

89 Wu and Sun 2009, p. 175.



Recommendations from Section 5: Safety and Police:

- a. Governments and education providers should ensure that Chinese international students receive complete, accessible, timely, consistent and up-to-date information about Australian police functions and protecting personal safety in Australian cities, in-language and at multiple points, including via digital platforms that can integrate easily with Chinese students' existing media practices (EG WeChat public accounts, sharable online videos via Youku, Tiktok, etc).
- b. In areas where concentrations of Chinese international student residents place Mandarin among the most widely spoken non-English community languages, police should engage Mandarin-capable community liaison officers.
- c. Police should use in-language WeChat public accounts as an effective and timely means of communicating with Chinese student communities relevant local information about crime, personal safety, and police functions and processes.
- d. Police should forge links with Chinese Scholars and Students Associations (CSSAs) at universities as a means of establishing relationships with Chinese student communities.
- e. Cross-cultural training for police should be reviewed to optimise their positive engagement with international students and their effective response to the needs of these members of the community.
- f. State, territory, federal and local governments should act as public advocates for the elimination of racism

6

Health

Problems identified in this section include that Chinese international students:

- May have culturally specific understandings of the roles and practices of medical service providers, leading to challenges in engaging with the Australian health system;
- Often find the OSHC insurance system confusing and difficult to navigate;
- Are not well served by current provisions for protecting mental health, and may not know where to turn in a mental health crisis;
- Have had culturally particular experiences of sex education, which may leave gaps in certain areas of knowledge.

The ability to maintain good physical and mental health is central to basic quality of life, and it is clearly imperative to ensure that international students can access appropriate resources to stay healthy while living in Australia.⁹⁰ However, health-related institutions, processes and cultures vary widely between nations, and Chinese students in Australia are faced with a new and unfamiliar health system. Generally, the need to understand the Australian health system does not arise until a student experiences illness, meaning that the challenge of navigating a foreign system is compounded by students' increased vulnerability due to being sick. Effective education for international students on how the Australian health system works, health promotion, and related available resources is crucial in this regard.⁹¹

The Chinese and Australian health systems differ in many important ways that significantly affect the assumptions and expectations of students who move from the former to the latter. For example,

while in Australia a patient's first port of call is a GP, students from China will most likely be used to presenting at a large hospital in the first instance. Small private clinics are not the rule in China and the concept of the "general practitioner" is not widely known. The necessity to obtain a referral letter before being able to visit a medical specialist is also likely to be new to students from China, where patients are generally directly referred to a specialist doctor at a hospital. Hospitals in China do not require patients to make a prior appointment for consultation, so the requirement to telephone a day or two ahead to make a GP appointment tends to be disconcerting for Chinese students in Australia. Chinese hospital emergency departments also typically do not experience the lengthy waiting periods seen at Australian hospitals, and the cost of basic treatment and medication in China—geared toward a large, less affluent population—is significantly lower than it is in Australia. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) also remains widely trusted and popular in China. Some Chinese students prefer it to western medicine, or use TCM and western medicine in combination. TCM rests on an entirely different philosophy of anatomy, health and illness to the one presupposed by western medicine. This may lead to frustration or confusion at diagnoses and treatments given by Australian health providers working wholly within the western tradition.

International students coming to study in Australia are not eligible for publicly funded health care and must purchase private health insurance (Overseas Student Health Cover, OSHC) as a condition of their student visa. OSHC is offered by six (at the time of writing) commercial insurance providers designated by the Department of Health. Each of the mandated providers offers various policies, and services that are covered vary, but basic OSHC does not cover "extras" like dental, optical or physiotherapy, and offers only limited benefits for pharmaceuticals.⁹² Prior studies have also shown that international students may

let their OSHC insurance lapse after the initial grant of their student visa. The ESOS code of practice, meanwhile, does not require education institutions to provide health services, but only to give students information on where they may seek medical treatment.⁹³

Negative experiences with Australia's health system were a topic raised spontaneously and regularly by participants in this study. First, it was obvious from the multiple times related questions arose that recently arrived students were generally unclear about many aspects of the Australian health system and OSHC in particular. They were unsure how to find out which GPs accepted OSHC, whether pharmaceuticals were covered and if so which ones, varying out-of-pocket expenses for different health services and providers and how to calculate these, and inclusions and exclusions of various policies. In seeking to understand how the OSHC system worked, students tended to ask their peers in the Chinese student community or seek in-language information online, including through local WeChat public accounts. (At the time of writing, only one of the six OSHC providers, Allianz, had a multilingual option on its website and a WeChat public account). Especially during the first year of their stay, students also struggled to acclimatise to the Australian norm of GPs, referral letters, medical appointments having to be made in advance, and interacting with doctors in English. Second, participants were dissatisfied with the patient experience at hospital emergency departments in Australia. They found waiting times lengthy and pharmaceuticals expensive compared with China.

Third, some participants were mistrustful of the quality of medical service provided in Australia. Sometimes this was connected with the unfamiliarity of standard processes and practices used by Australian health professionals in consultation, diagnosis and treatment (see quotes in the box below). More stressful were situations in which an Australian health professional made one diagnosis, only for the student to have the condition re-assessed by a doctor in China who provided a different diagnosis. In that situation, students typically concluded that the Australian

doctor had simply been wrong. The effect of such stories circulating in the community was to perpetuate a generalized air of anxiety about, and sometimes mistrust of the Australian health system.

It is likely that the stress that surrounds some students' interactions with the Australian health system is due in part to the fact that this is the first time these young people have had to navigate medical matters in a completely foreign environment without either parental assistance or local knowledge to supply advice and trusted personal recommendations. The box below gives an indication of students' positive as well as negative experiences. Nonetheless, it is obvious that clear, effective, and timely information provision on the Australian health system has the potential to significantly improve Chinese students' experiences.

Mental health

International students' mental health has recently become a focus of government attention. Following the death by suicide of Chinese international student Zhikai Liu in Melbourne in 2016, in January 2019 Victorian Coroner Audrey Jamieson called for improved strategies to help international students engage mental health services. In connection with Liu's case, the Coroners Prevention Unit noted:

- › a much lower prevalence of diagnosed mental illness among international student suicides (14.8%) than in the Australian-born student suicide cohort (66.7%); and that
- › whereas only 22.2% of the international student suicide cohort had attended a health service for a mental health related issue within six weeks of death, 57.1% of the Australian-born student suicide cohort had done so.⁹⁴

CHINESE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE AUSTRALIAN HEALTH SYSTEM

In 2018, The University of Melbourne and the Burnet Institute conducted an online survey of 723 Chinese-speaking international students in Australia, aimed at improving understanding of their sexual attitudes, knowledges and practices (see discussion below).⁹⁵ One question asked respondents to comment about their best and/ or worst experiences with health service providers in Australia. Selected responses below reflect the variety of answers provided by the 64 respondents who chose to answer this question.

Worst: waiting time is too long, for both ED and GP clinic. Best: have the privacy so that I could talk freely, where comparing hospital in China is usually overcrowded, others may hear my concerns and I feel like I was judged.

My period didn't come for two months, so I went to a clinic for an examination. They sent me to have blood taken, and I got the result and went back to the clinic. The doctor said there's nothing wrong, you're just stressed, and that was it. I spent AUD\$500 and had two appointments, yet there was no diagnosis and no treatment prescribed. Now it's been nearly three months since I had a period. I'm so disappointed in Australian health care. I'm planning to go back to China to see a doctor there.⁹⁶

My experience [of the Australian health system] was dreadful, just dreadful. It's so much less effective than in China. I [saw a doctor for] my psychological and physical [health] (skin allergy), but the doctor just told me to put up with it, just gave me a note so I could miss class and dismissed me?? Isn't it obvious I should have been sent to test for the cause of the allergy?! Do Australian doctors maybe have some kind of prejudice against international students?? There was no language problem, because my conversational English is fine, and my partner was with me as well. Doctors in China are better,

they'd send you straightaway for an allergy test, problem solved.

The doctor was very experienced, in Melbourne, and able to prescribe medication promptly based on symptoms.

The doctor was very patient, but the language problem sort of made me feel like we couldn't communicate fully.

I've seen doctors quite a few times in Australia, reasons being everyday minor illnesses, a sprained knee, the dentist, and immunizations. My experiences have all been very good, especially the dentist. She spoke Chinese, and explained in great detail what was happening with my teeth and how she needed to deal with it, and how much I'd have to pay. It was very reassuring.

Worst: The first GP was really old, at the uni health service. [S/he] didn't speak clearly and didn't suggest using Google Translate. Best: Next time I switched to a GP recommended by a classmate, also at the uni. This one was very warm and considerate and helped me by recommending and contacting a specialist for further investigations. [S/he] spoke clearly, and for specialized medical terms used Google Translate. [S/he] explained to me which department I had to go to next, for what kind of investigation.

The best was the GP I saw when I had an inflamed throat, who immediately diagnosed the problem and prescribed medication based on the symptoms. I took the medication and got better. The worst was a Chinese dentist I saw. Right off the bat [s/he] wanted to extract teeth, said they absolutely had to be extracted. The standard was too low, so in the end I went back to China for treatment.

In the same survey, over 61% of respondents felt that they would benefit from further information about the Australian healthcare system tailored for international students.

92 Commonwealth Ombudsman 2020, Private Health Insurance.

93 Marginson *et al* 2010, pp. 174-203.

94 Coroners Court of Victoria 2019.

95 Martin *et al* 2019. Note: the quotes included here are not included in the survey report.

96 This and all following quotes have been translated by the author.

Based on this, the Coroner concluded that there appears to be an underlying systemic problem with engaging international students in mental health treatment in Australia.

At the time of writing, the ongoing Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System has highlighted international students' mental health as an area of concern,⁹⁷ while the Productivity Commission's continuing national investigation into mental health is seeking information on international students' access to mental health services.⁹⁸ In the wake of Chinese international student Jiaqi He's apparent death by suicide in Melbourne in August 2019, Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan announced funding of \$200,000 for a new research project investigating mental health services for international students, to be undertaken by the Orygen research institute. The Minister noted that "We have a moral duty to ensure the international students who study in Australia are supported [...] and that includes support to maintain their mental health." But Orygen's executive director, Professor Patrick McGorry, [stated strongly](#) that university mental health services are in need of a shake-up in order to provide adequately for international students' needs.

The extant research indicates that international students are at high risk of experiencing mental health issues.⁹⁹ This has been connected with their experience of multiple stressors at a vulnerable time of life. Stressors include these students' need to negotiate an unfamiliar academic environment, their lack of local knowledge and practical skills to manage day-to-day life in Australia, and their tendency—which may be connected with cultural factors—to delay or avoid seeking professional help for mental health problems.¹⁰⁰ As Helen Forbes-Mewett observed in her 2019 report for IEAA, mental health problems have the potential to affect multiple areas of students' experience:

mental health is connected with many aspects of international student lives, not only because they are often at an age when mental health issues may arise, but also because of their new social environment. Among other related concerns primarily in Western contexts, mental health has been shown to be associated with safety and security, educational success/failure, health insurance and help-seeking.¹⁰¹

Increasing numbers of international students may also be arriving in Australia with existing mental health issues, while university, community, and public mental health services appear to be under-resourced to cope with the volume and cultural specificity of their mental health needs.¹⁰²

Governments, peak bodies, researchers, and education providers are now beginning to consider appropriate responses to this pressing issue.¹⁰³ The most thorough and detailed response to date has been provided by English Australia, the national peak body for the English language teaching sector. Funded by the NSW state government and Allianz Australia, in 2019 English Australia released the *Guide to Best Practice in International Student Mental Health*.¹⁰⁴ The guide provides detailed, contextualized discussion of ten elements of best practice for education providers, covering written policy, promotion, staff training and awareness, healthy lifestyle promotion, early identification, availability and provision, accessibility of service, reasonable adjustments, communication and record-keeping processes, and support for staff and other students.

Most of the core participants in the present study experienced no or only relatively mild problems with mental health during the years of the study. Those who did suffer from some psychological distress and asked the author's advice had mixed attitudes toward seeking help from mental health professionals. One or two were already

habituated to this practice, having been referred to counselling by parents in China when they had encountered problems before. Others, however, were not used to outsourcing mental health issues to professionals and preferred to speak with someone they knew personally rather than a paid stranger. Some who did speak with university counsellors, psychotherapists, or state social workers found them helpful; others found that language was a problem, or that professionals' attitudes felt too bureaucratic and impersonal. In this area as in many others, Chinese students have a variety of experiences and attitudes, making generalization difficult.

The difficulties that Chinese international students can face if they do encounter serious problems with mental health while in Australia, however, were illustrated sharply in fieldwork. Serious mental health issues directly impacted three study participants. One participant, Wenling, who was experiencing extreme stress as a result of combined academic and family pressures, contacted the author via WeChat in a state of distress while experiencing self-harm ideation. Realizing that Wenling would require professional crisis counselling in Mandarin, the author phoned Lifeline to seek advice on available services. After a long wait while the telephone counsellor herself searched for CALD mental health resources, it turned out to be possible to connect Wenling with a free phone interpreting service which could simultaneously translate her conversation with a Lifeline counsellor. This combination of services was difficult to track down even for the author, who speaks English as her first language and is a long-term Australian resident. It seems highly unlikely that Wenling would have been able to access these services unassisted, especially in her distressed state.

A second case concerns another student, Ming, who after a series of extreme stresses in her personal life attempted suicide on three consecutive occasions. Her final and most serious attempt was only unsuccessful thanks to her being rescued by concerned strangers. Ming was hospitalized and assigned a state social worker for follow-up visits to monitor her mental state.

The final case concerns Honghong, a mature-age student who was under extreme financial and family-related pressures. She suffered a psychotic breakdown and slept on the street in the Melbourne CBD for three nights before being admitted to psychiatric care in a public hospital under the Mental Health Act. She was discharged a few days later, following treatment, and assigned a state social worker. Again, Honghong only accessed mental health services as a result of her personal connection with the author, who advised her to see a doctor when she noticed her agitated state. When the problem first arose, the author contacted the counselling service at Honghong's university, which was able to provide general advice about what to do for Honghong over the phone. But no one from the university ever contacted Honghong directly, or visited her in hospital, or spoke with her psychiatrist or social worker. It is difficult to say what the outcome of this case might have been had the student not happened to have a local contact able to help her navigate Australian mental health services. A couple of months after this crisis, Honghong's social worker contacted the author saying she could no longer get in touch with Honghong. She had simply disappeared, also breaking off contact with the author.

In each of the latter two cases, it is the author's understanding that state mental health services stepped in to treat the students without charge as a form of needs-based provision outside the ESOS framework. However, as Marginson and co-authors note in relation to similar situations they uncovered in their research, such an ad hoc approach is clearly not sustainable if and when the numbers of international students requiring urgent mental health treatment increases.¹⁰⁵

In the former two cases, the students became deeply involved with evangelical Christian churches. In fact, these extremely vulnerable students were the only ones in the participant group to develop long-term links with evangelical churches in Australia. Some of these churches intentionally target international students for religious conversion, and offer them a type of social support that promises to fill gaps left by education providers and other local agencies in

97 State of Victoria 2018-19.

98 Productivity Commission 2019, p. 90.

99 Pejic 2012; Orygen 2017.

100 Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer 2011.

101 Forbes-Mewett 2019, p. 3.

102 Ibid., pp. 5 and 8; Marginson *et al* 2010 p. 291.

103 English Australia 2018; Council for International Education 2018, *Meeting of the Council for International Education*.

104 English Australia 2018.

105 Marginson *et al* 2010, p. 291.

facilitating their social inclusion and connection. While this may in some cases be a pragmatic way of supporting students' mental health, it is questionable whether relegating international students' psychological support services to churches that may pressure them toward religious conversion is an optimal outcome.

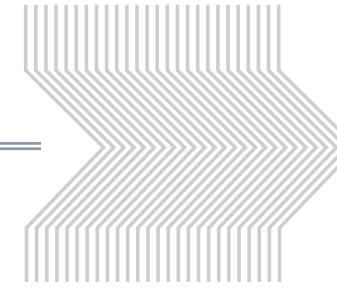
Sexual health

Extant research suggests that international students suffer poor sexual health outcomes, including higher than average rates of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).¹⁰⁶ With the intention of generating data on Chinese international students' sexual health to inform service and information provision, in 2018, The University of Melbourne and the Burnet Institute conducted an online survey of 723 Chinese-speaking international students in Australia.¹⁰⁷ The median age of participants was 22 years old, and the vast majority (96%) came from the People's Republic of China. A majority (69%) identified as female. Findings include that:

- › Approximately one in three respondents had not received any sex education in high school (31%);
- › Content of sex education varied based on location. Human reproduction and HIV/ AIDS were emphasised more in sex education participants had received overseas; while how to use a condom, preventing sexually transmissible infections (STIs), sexual consent and sexual harassment were emphasised more in Australia;
- › Over half of respondents had engaged in genital touching and/or other forms of sexual activity in their lifetime (56%);
- › A large minority of respondents reported a change in their sexual and dating behaviours since arriving in Australia (20%), especially increases in sexual activity and engaging in sexual behaviours for the first time;
- › On average, participants obtained low scores on the STI knowledge quiz included in the survey;
- › Almost half of participants had visited a doctor or other health service in Australia (47%); however, very few of these had discussed sexual health with an Australian health professional (21%);
- › The majority of participants stated that they would use Chinese-language internet sources for general information on sex and relationships (81%), but over 75% would seek information from an Australian health provider if they thought they had contracted an STI or experienced an unplanned pregnancy;
- › Among participants who had ever had penetrative sex, most reported they had never had an STI test in Australia (13% had done so);
- › Half of participants thought they would benefit from more tailored information for international students about sexual health.

These findings suggest that this population may have unmet needs in terms of sexual health-related service and information provision in Australia.

¹⁰⁶ Poljski 2011.
¹⁰⁷ Martin *et al* 2019.



Recommendations from Section 6: Health

- a. Education providers should work together with governments, OSHC insurers, health service providers and community health organizations serving CALD populations to ensure that complete, accessible, timely, consistent and up-to-date information is provided to Chinese international students in-language and at multiple points, including via digital platforms that can integrate easily with these students' existing media practices (EG WeChat public accounts, sharable online videos via Youku, Tiktok, etc), regarding:
 - › How the health system in Australia works for international students, especially what to expect from university health services, GPs and hospital emergency departments;
 - › What OSHC covers and how to make OSHC claims;
 - › Maintaining good mental health, including the identification of mental illness and where to turn if one experiences mental health problems including crisis situations;
 - › Maintaining good sexual health, including STI identification, treatment and prevention; contraception; and where to turn if one experiences sexual health problems including unplanned pregnancy and STIs.
- b. The designated OSHC insurance companies should make accessible multilingual online lists of collaborating health service providers in specific areas, including information about collaborating GPs, mental and sexual health service providers, and Mandarin-speaking providers. Effective provision of this information could be a condition of insurers remaining signatories to the Deed for the provision of Overseas Student Health Cover.
- c. Education providers should develop stronger mechanisms to ensure that their international students maintain OSHC.
- d. The higher education sector should adapt and apply the best practice guidelines proposed in the Guide to Best Practice in International Student Mental Health by English Australia.
- e. Education providers should increase resourcing to allow the provision of Mandarin-speaking counsellors at universities, and/ or should develop partnerships with external CALD organizations that can provide culturally appropriate counselling in-language.
- f. Governments should increase resourcing of community mental health services to enable them to effectively engage international student populations.
- g. Governments should increase resourcing of state service providers including social workers to allow them to formally extend their services to international students within local communities. This may necessitate additional resources for cross-cultural training and/ or targeted appointments of professionals with requisite cross-cultural skills.
- h. Governments should increase resourcing to public mental healthcare services to allow them to formally extend their services to international students in serious, acute or crisis situations, or from smaller education institutions that lack a counselling service. This may necessitate additional resources for cross-cultural training and/ or targeted appointments of professionals with requisite cross-cultural skills.
- i. Governments and universities should support further in-depth research into Chinese international students' mental health and sexual health.



Conclusion

The rapid and extensive internationalization of Australian higher education over recent decades has fundamentally transformed both the nation's universities and its urban communities. There are now sizeable segments of our cities' youth populations, including students from China, for whom the systems, processes and institutions that structure local social life are new and unfamiliar.

For international students to enjoy wellbeing while studying in Australia, it is essential to facilitate their ability to understand and effectively engage many Australian systems and institutions beyond the university. These include, at a minimum, the rental market, employment, the police, and the health system.

To support their engagements with these, students require complete, accessible, timely, consistent and up-to-date information about how these systems work in Australia. Harder to quantify but also crucial to students' wellbeing is social inclusion fostering a sense of local belonging and connection, both on and off campus.

Currently, under the ESOS Framework, it is education providers that are charged with the primary responsibility for providing information and services to international students to support their wellbeing while they study and live in Australia. However, not only is the ESOS Framework vague on specific expectations,¹⁰⁸ but multiple aspects of students' lives in Australian communities lie beyond education providers' capacity to access or regulate. While studying in Australia, Chinese international students do not only have the identity of *student*, but also multiple other identities that see them engage with a wide array of local institutions. For example, these students may also have identities as tenants, job-seekers, media consumers, workers,

medical patients, volunteers, victims of crime, and members of community organizations.

Thus, there is arguably a mismatch between the purview of the agencies tasked with responsibility for providing information and services to support these students' wellbeing--education providers--and the far wider scope of the students' actual everyday engagements in Australian communities.

This mismatch is a key factor underlying the current somewhat patchy protection of Chinese international students' wellbeing. Based on the findings of their large internationally comparative research project, Gaby Ramia and co-authors put it even more strongly. They observed that despite the extensive codification underpinning Australia's ESOS Framework, "the absence of specific and effectively enforceable protections [for international students] highlights a national welfare deficit that is internationally significant. [...]he formal regulatory programme of Australia is one which pursues global market share over and above genuine concerns for student wellbeing."¹⁰⁹

Based on research findings, this report concurs with Ramia and co-authors that we need to reconceptualize international students not as consumers of an educational product whose interests are ultimately the responsibility of the product vendor, but instead as part of the national youth population and residents within local communities, with rights obtaining as such, and interests that are also the responsibility of Australian governments and state and community agencies.

Even the shortest stay by an international student typically lasts at least several months. Most

108 Ramia *et al* 2013, pp. 77-97.

109 Ibid., pp. 78 and 96; see also Kell and Vogl 2012.

of these students live in our communities for several years, and a proportion will transition after graduation to skilled migrant status and stay permanently. While they are sometimes referred to as transient migrants, it is clear that stays of these lengths differentiate international students markedly from tourists and other types of short-term visitor. It thus makes sense to understand international students as local residents and community members, and to provide information and services on that basis. To support this, this report has offered recommendations in six key areas that emerged from fieldwork as in need of adjustment for optimal functioning.

Approaching international students as residents and community members would support a more holistic approach to their wellbeing in Australia. This should be underpinned by more effective communication with the students, more effective regulation of systems supporting their welfare and wellbeing, and further collaborations with groups and individuals with the intercultural skills and experience needed to advance our effective engagement with this segment of the nation's youth population. All of this relies on the development of clearer, more consistent, and more enforceable standards governing international students' wellbeing, as well as increased investment by governments and education providers to support real change in this area.

Supporting international students' wellbeing in Australia in a holistic way not only has the potential to confer a competitive advantage on Australian education as a product in the global education marketplace of the future, it can also foster students' lifelong affinity for the country and shape generational attitudes toward Australia in overseas nations including China.¹¹⁰ More importantly, supporting these students' wellbeing is the nation's ethical responsibility to them as young people entrusted into in our care.

¹¹⁰ Gill and Jakobson 2017.

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Appendix

Research Methods

Participants were recruited to this study by means of a callout delivered via email and WeChat to thousands of commencing and current Chinese students in (or soon to depart for) Australia with the assistance of five Australian universities, three Chinese universities, and four Chinese education agencies. In mid-2015, Martin travelled to China for four weeks and conducted initial interviews with 30 prospective students who answered the call, and 10 of their families, in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hefei, Kaifeng and Shenyang. These 30 students became part of the study's core participant group. During the same trip, she also observed and participated in 4 pre-departure briefings for students and their parents run by Australian universities and Chinese education agents. Additionally, she established a control group of 30 Chinese domestic undergraduate students at Shanghai University, who she interviewed and with whom she maintained contact over the following years in order to ascertain what was distinct in the experiences of those who studied abroad.

Back in Melbourne in late 2015, Martin gathered an additional 20 core participants who had already commenced studies in five Victorian universities at foundation, undergraduate and masters level. Over the next four years, she met regularly with the core group of 50 in large groups, small groups, and individually. In addition to conducting periodic in-depth recorded interviews, she spent extended time with participants and their friends, housemates, boyfriends, classmates and visiting parents at activities organized by them (thus she spoke regularly with male as well as female students), and met them periodically for chats over coffee, meals or home visits. With the help of the project's research assistant, Dr Can Qin, she organized a series of 11 large-group activities with the core participants in Melbourne. Between 2015 and 2018, Martin also maintained almost daily contact with the group via WeChat.

Her average number of face-to-face interactions with each of the core participants over the life of the project was 12 (lowest number 5, highest number 26). The study also incorporates additional data from in-depth semi-structured interviews Martin conducted with 15 participants in a pilot study in 2012, 6 of whom were re-interviewed again 3 to 4 years later.

When participants graduated from their courses and moved away from Melbourne, Martin continued to keep in touch with them via social media. Between 2018 and 2019 she travelled to interview participants post-graduation, both to Sydney and Canberra where some had undertaken further study, and to various cities in China where some returned to work. On regular trips to China each year between 2015 and 2018, she also conducted interviews with a number of additional graduates from Australian universities who had returned to various cities in China to work, and with professionals working in the international education industry. She also maintained contact with those participants who remained in Australia to work after graduation, and recorded interviews with them about their post-graduation experiences.





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