

Inner East Primary Care Partnership International Students & Inclusion Partnership

CASE STUDY



WHAT IS THE ISSUE AND NEED?

In 2019 the IEPCP, having adopted the strategic priority of social inclusion, recognised the multiple challenges faced by international students living and studying in the inner east region of Melbourne at Monash, Deakin and Swinburne Universities and Holmesglen and Box Hill Institutes – a large vulnerable population group in our catchment.

These students face a number of stressors that can put them at risk of higher levels of psychological distress and social isolation than domestic students, such as acculturation stress, living independently for the first time, financial vulnerability, lack of personal support networks, adapting to a new teaching and learning style, employment exploitation and discrimination, barriers to accessing health and wellbeing support services, and racism.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exacerbated the existing challenges and stressors faced by international students including disruption to study, loss of employment income, exclusion from federal income support, changed living circumstances resulting in further isolation or overcrowding and in some cases homelessness, and forced separation from family and friends, particularly with the extended Melbourne boundary hard lockdown.

In 2019, more than 40,000 international students attended Deakin, Monash and Swinburne Universities and almost 39,000 international students were living in the Inner East region (Mitchell Inst)



International education is of great importance to the Victorian economy and to the viability of Victoria's higher education sector, as Victoria's largest service export industry for more than ten years

During Pandemic Restrictions

Six in ten students in paid work when the pandemic began, lost their jobs

29% had gone without meals since the lockdown started, up 22% prior to lockdown

26% pawned or sold something for money, up from 12%

23% asked community organisations for help, up from 4%

Just under a third said they felt lonely before the pandemic, but 63% felt lonelier since

Reference:
Morris, A., Hastings, C., Wilson, S., Mitchell, E., Ramia, G. & Overgaard, C. (2020). The experience of international students before and during COVID-19: Housing, work, study and wellbeing. University of Technology Sydney

WHAT DID WE DO?

We brought together tertiary education institutions, public health services, community service organisations, and Victorian Government representatives in the East to collaborate and establish health and wellbeing service referral pathways for international students as a preventative measure following analysis of data about poor health outcomes and a series of suicides amongst this cohort.

The Partnership was founded on established relationships, leveraging IEPCP's stakeholder connections from numerous existing partnerships. Membership was canvassed with individuals in key positions across the catchment who have organisational responsibility for international students; and those providing local health, youth and community support services. An international student and advocate was recruited by the IEPCP to support the Partnership direction.

The Partnership was a unique opportunity to:

- Broaden awareness of the challenges and stressors faced by international students in the Inner East, particularly for local government, health and community services to hear directly from higher education providers, and for partners to hear from students about their lived experience
- Bring together the tertiary education sector in the catchment for the first time to share practice in relation to student wellbeing
- Strengthen relationships across the health service sector and coordinate referral pathways for at risk students on campuses
- Identify opportunities to promote inclusion and connectedness for socially isolated students, such as referrals into rewarding volunteer opportunities, especially those critical for the recovery phase of COVID-19 (e.g. social contact with isolated older people)
- Bring together international student representatives across the campuses to share information and strategies for resilience

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES?

The Partnership provided a platform for stakeholders to identify issues of mutual concern, and share service and support information. There was significant expertise and knowledge across the partnership and a willingness to collaborate and find ways to improve outcomes for students, which meant the Partnership was well placed to immediately pivot and respond to the developing crisis for many international students from the onset of the pandemic in Melbourne.

In December 2020, the IEPCP hosted an online forum delivered by members of the Partnership *Leaving No-One Out: International Students and Inclusion*. The forum featured 22 speakers including seven international students, a presentation from Monash University on co-designing programs with international students, and a showcase of best practice examples by local community-based organisations of the inclusion of international students.

The IEPCP website has [recordings](#) from the forum and is also finalising an issues paper that will provide more detail about the Partnership activity, and the timeline of events that seriously impacted international students during 2020.

Forum participants

"It is very helpful... to think about how I could support our international students differently in the future... Also learned the importance of attending this type of forum... to deepen our understanding... of International Students."

"Giving students a forum to find their voice (is) a great way to bring about change"

"the issues highlighted through this time may provide some insights that will lead to new actions, in the longer-term"



Partners observations COVID impacts on international students:

- Poor mental health and emotional wellbeing, high levels of distress, isolation, depression & anxiety
- Difficulty meeting basic living costs, insecure employment, subject to financial scams, increasing personal debt, employment exploitation or discrimination
- Housing insecurity – difficulty managing and maintaining tenancy agreements, financially forced into shared accommodation, difficult household dynamics, domestic violence, fear of increased risk of COVID-19
- Disengagement from studies with technology and remote learning challenges
- Visa insecurity
- Increased gaming and gambling as coping strategies,
- Racism from the broader community, particularly Asian students following the emergence of the pandemic
- No access to medicare
- Lack of awareness of local services, cultural barriers to seeking help and culturally inappropriate services

WHAT'S NEXT?

International students still face multiple challenges as they seek to recover from the disruptions to their lives by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Many remain overseas having left to visit family prior to imposed travel restrictions, and the education sector is working hard to keep them engaged with study, and support those studying remotely from here. Some students have been deeply traumatised by their experiences but have also demonstrated their resilience and commitment, hopeful of an opportunity to establish a career in the area and give back to the community, thankful for the supports they have received. The IEPCP International Students & Inclusion Partnership continues to collaborate and establish mechanisms for student support, as well as exploring ways to address the more structural issues of racism in the future.

Organisations:

Higher Education

- Monash University
- Deakin University
- Swinburne University of Technology
- Box Hill Institute
- Holmesglen Institute
- International student bodies

Health

- Access Health & Community
- Carrington HealthAbility
- EACH
- Link Health & Community
- Centre for Holistic Health

Government

- Boroondara Council
- Manningham Council
- Monash Council
- Whitehorse Council
- Dept of Health & Human Services
- Study Melbourne
- Victorian Multicultural Commission

Other

- Eastern Volunteers
- headspace Hawthorn
- MiCare
- Eastern Community Legal Centre