

# International Students and COVID-19: Supporting International Students in Inner East Melbourne in 2020



## Inner East International Students and Inclusion Partnership

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*The Inner East Primary Care Partnership wishes to acknowledge and thank our partners in the International Student Inclusion Partnership for their contributions to the Partnership and this Report, and Kate Jeffery, for her leadership. We acknowledge the support of the Victorian Government.*



*We acknowledge the Wurundjeri people and other peoples of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of the land on which our work in the community takes place. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background to the project

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

The health and wellbeing of international students has been the subject of considerable research and media reporting in recent years. International students are at risk of higher levels of psychological distress and social isolation than domestic students, face stressors and challenges that are specific to the lived experience of being an international student, and often have significant barriers in discovering and navigating the complex health and community support systems to access the help they need.

In late 2019 the Inner East Primary Care Partnership initiated the International Student Inclusion Partnership Project in recognition of the challenges faced by the growing number of international students studying at higher education institutions in Melbourne. Many of these challenges were further exacerbated by the onset of the COVID pandemic in 2020 and the partnership was then well placed to identify these issues as they unfolded.

## Purpose of the project

The purpose of the project was to identify ways to promote social inclusion and support the health and wellbeing of international students by addressing identified systemic barriers. This was to be achieved by the formation of a partnership with representation from higher educational institutions and mainstream health and community sector services. The purpose of the partnership was to identify:

- Barriers and enablers to broader community engagement experienced by students.
- Barriers to help seeking by international students (e.g. including cultural beliefs and practices in home countries and unfamiliarity with the Australian health system).
- Opportunities to establish referral pathways for international students to key support services in community-based settings.
- Opportunities to enhance social inclusion and acceptance of cultural diversity and international student participation in the wider community.

## Project activities included:

- Formal meetings of the partnership.
- Targeted meetings with individual partners and stakeholders, most of which were conducted on Zoom
- Establishment of a working group of local councils
- Proactive outreach and networking
- Monitoring of media reporting on issues facing international students and the higher education sector during the pandemic
- Review and monitoring of the research evidence-base in regard to international students.

- Information dissemination and resource sharing
- Employment of an international student graduate, Souphaphone Thoommavongsa (Nang), to assist with the project and provide insights from lived experience
- Small focus group discussion with international students
- Participation in Study Melbourne webinars and other online forums, including research forums conducted by the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre
- Planning and delivery of an online forum; Leaving No-One Out: International Students and Inclusion.

## Benefits of the partnership

There were many benefits arising from the partnership and having an established partnership as the impacts of the pandemic on international student evolved was serendipitous and of significant value.

The key benefits were:

- Providing a cross sectoral platform for sharing understandings about the experiences and challenges of international students, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic
- Enabling the education sector to share their responses to the needs of international students and examples of good practice
- Connecting the mainstream health and community service sector with the higher education sector
- Connecting community-based services committed to improving outcomes for international students with each other
- Identifying entry points for engagement with international students
- Promoting awareness of Victorian Government policies and initiatives in support of international students during COVID-19
- Sharing of specialist knowledge and expertise
- Fostering collaboration around prevention initiatives
- Sharing of information and resources between partners
- Reinforcing a focus on social inclusion as a determinant of health and wellbeing

## Emerging Issues and Challenges

The project partners identified a range of risks and challenges faced by international students as well as barriers to health and wellbeing help seeking. Risks and challenges included impacts on mental health and emotional wellbeing, financial, employment and housing insecurity, and disengagement from study. Barriers to health and wellbeing help seeking include socio-cultural barriers and lack of access to Medicare.

The specific issues faced by different groups of students, such as the differences for newly arrived students commencing studies in Melbourne compared with graduate students who were unable to return home, were also considered by partners.

## Recommendations

These recommendations were captured for the consideration of the Inner East International Student Inclusion Partnership to help map out possible next steps. More detail is provided in PART 5 of this report.

### Progressing the partnership

1. The partnership **builds on the strong foundation established in 2020 by continuing to meet regularly** to provide updates on the status of international students, share information and resources and work together to identify ways to better support international students and promote their inclusion in local communities.
2. That the **current composition of the partnership is reviewed**, including fostering support from migrant specific community groups and migrant services, involving international students, and identifying new partners to join the partnership.
3. Partners consider establishing **small working groups** for the purposes of collaboration.

### Potential future actions

4. Partners recognise the ongoing challenges for international students in meeting daily needs in 2021, and the **importance of being able to access emergency relief, including income support** for those who need it.
5. Non-higher education partners **participate in the online forums and webinars** conducted by university partners and Study Melbourne.
6. Partners consider **hosting workshops** on issues of mutual interest.
7. Tertiary Education partners continue to promote new opportunities and improvements to developing **stronger connections between international students and domestic students**.
8. Partners consider ways of **strengthening inclusion with local communities** and **strengthening access to services** for all international students, including older students and international students with dependents.
9. Partners explore and assess the **best way of promoting information to international students about local services**.
10. The partnership undertakes a **needs and gap analysis** of current relationships between the higher education sector and the health and community services sector.
11. Partners consider developing or incorporating an **international student wellbeing hub in the catchment**.
12. The partnership consider an **advocacy strategy** on issues of concern for students.

### Guiding principles for working together

13. Principles of **partnership and codesign with international students** guide any planning and development of actions and initiatives to support student health and wellbeing.
14. All agencies have a **cultural lens** in the promotion and provision of services to international students, to ensure messaging is culturally relevant, meaningful in first languages and is welcoming and inclusive.

## PART 1 BACKGROUND

### Introduction

International education is of great importance to the Victorian economy and to the viability of Victoria's higher education sector. It has been Victoria's largest service export industry for more than ten years: in 2018, the sector generated \$11.8 billion in export revenue for the state and supported almost 79,000 Victorian jobs.<sup>1</sup> Nationally, international education ranks fourth as Australia's largest export sector. Around 227,000 international students lived and studied in Victoria in 2019, almost one third (32.1%) of Australia's onshore international student contingent. Many students were from the Asia Pacific region, including 88,000 student enrolments from China, 50,500 from India, 16,500 from Malaysia, 13,000 from Vietnam, 9,500 from Sri Lanka, 8,000 from Thailand and 6,700 from Indonesia (Victorian Government, 2019).<sup>2 3</sup>

The intrinsic value of international education goes well beyond the dollars earned:

*International students or their visiting friends and relatives comprise 60% of Australia's tourism numbers. Our cities, regions and campuses are more vibrant, diverse places to live, work and study because so many young people choose to spend a few valuable years here. Offshore education services add even more value, and the sector's soft-power dividend across our region over decades is incalculable with over 2.5 million alumni across the world, including many who rise to the top of Asian societies.*

Julian Hill, MP, Member for Bruce, Co-Chair of the Parliamentary Friends of International Education, formerly Executive Director, International Education, Victoria

The Inner East Primary Care Partnership, funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, initiated the International Student Inclusion Partnership Project in late 2019, in recognition of the challenges faced by the growing number of international students studying at higher education institutions in Melbourne. IEPCP has a specific focus on the Inner East Region of Melbourne - Boroondara, Manningham, Monash and Whitehorse local government areas - which features three of Victoria's leading universities, Deakin University, Monash University and Swinburne University, and two leading TAFE institutions, Box Hill Institute and Holmesglen.

In 2019, more than 40,000 international students attended Monash University, Deakin University, and Swinburne University of Technology.

International students also attend private training institutions and colleges, while an increasing number of students from overseas study at secondary schools, both state and private schools, in the Inner East region.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Victorian Government, 2019 <https://djpr.vic.gov.au/priorityindustries-sectors/international-education>

<sup>2</sup> See Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Victorian Government, 2019 <https://djpr.vic.gov.au/priority-industries-sectors/international-education>

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, H & Sherrill, H (2019). *Overseas students in higher education in Australia: a quick guide*. Research Paper Series 2018-2019. Social Policy Section, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia, Canberra.

Statistics provided by the Mitchell Institute indicate that almost 39,000 students were living in the Inner East Region in 2019. International students also live in neighbouring suburbs along train lines and main transport routes that would connect them to universities and education institutions in the Inner East: for example, almost 7,900 international students lived in suburbs including Clayton South, Springvale, Dandenong, Clarinda and Noble Park in Kingston and Greater Dandenong. Other students travel from the Outer East and from across Melbourne to study at Monash, Swinburne or Deakin, or the TAFE institutions, Holmesglen, and Box Hill.

In recent data, the Mitchell Institute has calculated that the number of international students in the Inner East will have fallen by over 10,000 in 2020 due to travel restrictions and other pandemic-related impacts of Covid-19 restrictions.<sup>4</sup>

## Health and Wellbeing Challenges Prior to COVID-19

The health and wellbeing of international students has been the subject of considerable research and media reporting in recent years. International students are at risk of higher levels of psychological distress and social isolation than domestic students, face stressors and challenges that are specific to the lived experience of being an international student, and often have significant barriers in discovering and navigating the complex health and community support systems to access the help they need. These concerns predated the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Life stressors and challenges faced by international students include<sup>5</sup>:

- **Acculturation stress and for many, culture shock.** Navigating life in a new and unfamiliar culture can be challenging for many international students. For many this will involve learning a new language and facing **language barriers** in daily life.
- **Adapting to a new academic system and teaching styles; study stress.** Concerns about meeting and maintaining academic standards to continue enrolment and achieving personal, family and community expectations.
- **Learning how to live independently**, often for the first time, in the absence of family support. This includes having to cook, clean, manage finances, housing, and other aspects of life.
- **Financial stress and vulnerability due to study and living costs.** Students who have part time employment may have poor life/work/study balance, which can impact on academic performance and contribute to higher psychological distress.

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<sup>4</sup> Hurley, P. (2020). Issues Paper: International students vital to coronavirus recovery. Mitchell Institute: Melbourne. Statistics used in the research was shared with Study Melbourne.

<sup>5</sup> There is an extensive research evidence-base documenting these issues. Key references include:  
Forbes-Mewett, H. and Sawyer, AM. (2016) International students and mental health, *Journal of International Students*, Vol.6, No. 3, pp. 661-677. IGA Global USA.  
Sawir, E, Marginson, S, Deumert, A, Nyland & Ramia, G. (2008), Loneliness and international students: An Australian study, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 148–80.  
Skromanis, S., Cooling, N., Rodgers, B., Purton, T., Fan, F., Bridgman, H., Harris, K., Presser, J. & Mond, J. (2018). Health and well-being of international university students, and comparison with domestic students, in Tasmania, Australia, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol. 15, No. 6, p. 1147.



- International students can face **loneliness and social isolation**, and experience difficulties with establishing friendships, connecting with domestic students and local communities, and developing a sense of belonging.
- **Lack of personal support networks** can place strains on levels of personal resilience needed to manage crises, and cope with study and life stressors.
- International students are frequently the subject of **exploitation and discrimination** in the **labour market**<sup>6</sup> and in **housing**.<sup>7</sup>
- **Barriers to accessing health and wellbeing support.** Unfamiliarity with mainstream health and community services; problems navigating the Australian health system; restrictions on access to Medicare-funded services and perceived ineligibility for other community-based services; socio-cultural barriers to help seeking.
- International students may also face concerns around **sexual and reproductive health**<sup>8</sup>, and **intimate partner relationships**,<sup>9</sup> and International students report **experiences of racism** from the broader community.<sup>10</sup>

**Poor mental health** has emerged as a significant issue of concern among international students over the past two decades.<sup>11</sup> **International students have been found to be at higher risk of psychological distress than domestic students** due to the combination of life stressors that they face.<sup>12</sup> It has been estimated **around 25 per cent** of international students experience psychological distress and mental health problems.<sup>13</sup>

Concerns about the mental health and emotional wellbeing of international students are borne out by levels of suicide among international students: a 2019 Coroners Prevention Unit investigation into deaths by suicide of international students in Victoria reported 27 recorded deaths between

<sup>6</sup> Farbenblum, B & Berg, L. (2018). *Wage Theft in Silence: Why migrant workers do not recover their unpaid wages in Australia*. Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, UNSW Law & UTS, Sydney.

<sup>7</sup> Berg, L & Farbenblum, B. (2019). *Living Precariously: Understanding international students' housing experiences in Australia*. Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, UNSW Law & UTS, Sydney.

<sup>8</sup> Burchard, A, Laurence, C & Stocks, N (2011). Female international students and sexual health: qualitative study into knowledge, beliefs and attitudes. *Australian Family Physician*, Vol.40, No.10, October 2011, pp.817-820.

Poljski C (2011). *On Your Own: Sexual and reproductive health of female international students in Australia*.

Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, Collingwood.

McKenny, L., Chen, H & Blakkarly, J. "Sex education gap haunts Australia's international students". SBS Australia, 1 March 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Martin F, Qin C, Douglass C, Lim M, El-Hayek C. (2019). *Intimate attitudes, knowledges and practices: Chinese-speaking international students in Australia*, The University of Melbourne and The Burnet Institute, Melbourne.

Australian Human Rights Commission (2017). *Change the course: National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities*, AHRC

Washington, J, "Special report: Universities 'failing' international students on sexual violence", SBS Australia, 15 May 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Mills, N. "International students say challenges in Australia include loneliness, racism, poverty", ABC Radio Melbourne, 1 May 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Forbes-Mewett, H. (2020). *International students and mental health*. Research Brief: 02/June 2020, Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre, Monash University, Clayton.

<sup>12</sup> Orygen. (2017). *Under the radar. The mental health of Australian university students*. Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, Melbourne.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Forbes-Mewett, H, Australian Research Council Linkage Projects International Students Mental Health Summary, Monash University, 2019.



the years 2009-2015.<sup>14</sup> The Victorian Government believed this did not reflect the actual numbers of international students who had died by suicide; <sup>15</sup> by January 2021, the Coroners Prevention Unit had uncovered 47 suicides of international students in Victoria between 2009 and 2019. The unit identified key themes that were common to these deaths: educational and financial pressure, isolation and homesickness, and barriers to accessing mental health support.<sup>16</sup>

The precarious situation of many international students has added layers of complexity to the stressors many students experience in their lives in Australia, heightening the risk of serious health and emotional wellbeing outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

## IEPCP International Student Inclusion Partnership Project

Awareness of the challenges facing international students prior to COVID-19 led to the Inner East Primary Care Partnership initiating a project aimed at broadening community-based inclusion for international students through a population-health prevention focussed partnership between the higher education sector, public health and community sector organisations in the Inner East Metropolitan catchment of Melbourne. It was recognised that students spent the majority of their time off campus, living in the community, and that a whole of community response was needed to promote inclusion, improve health and wellbeing and the students' overall experience of living and studying in Melbourne.

The project aimed to establish a cross sectoral partnership drawing together representatives to work collaboratively to identify ways to promote social inclusion and support the health and wellbeing of international students by addressing identified systemic barriers.

Specifically, the IEPCP aimed to

- Establish a partnership of local representatives from higher educational institutions and mainstream health and community sector services to share information and expertise regarding the health and wellbeing needs and challenges faced by international students living in the Inner East.
- The partnership would identify:
- Barriers and enablers to broader community engagement experienced by students.
- Barriers to help seeking by international students (e.g. including cultural beliefs and practices in home countries and unfamiliarity with the Australian health system).
- Opportunities to establish referral pathways for international students to key support services in community-based settings.

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<sup>14</sup> Coroners Court of Victoria. "Coroner warns of barriers to mental health support for international students". Media Release, Monday 14 January 2019.

SBS Australia. "Coroner recommends more support for international students after 27 suicides in six years", SBS News, Monday 14 January 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Forbes-Mewett, H, Australian Research Council Linkage Projects International Students Mental Health Summary, Monash University, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Cook, H, " Coroner calls for action after dozens of international students take their own lives", The Age, 14 January 2021.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

- Opportunities to enhance social inclusion and acceptance of cultural diversity and international student participation in the wider community.

The original scope of the partnership project was limited to the three universities in the Inner East. A project brief was developed, identifying potential partners and stakeholders (Appendix 1). This was shared with key contacts at Deakin, Monash and Swinburne universities for input and modification. A program logic and an action plan were also developed to provide rigour to the project in terms of anticipated inputs and outcomes.

A working group was formed with representatives from Deakin, Monash and Swinburne, and key community sector organisations, including the Centre for Holistic Health, MiCare, Eastern Volunteers, and Carrington Health. The first working group meeting was held in February 2020.

## Partners and Stakeholders

Since the initial meeting in February 2020, the partnership evolved and expanded to include:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| • Deakin University                                  | • Eastern Community Legal Centre/Deakin Student Legal Service |
| • Monash University                                  | • Eastern Volunteers  |
| • Swinburne University of Technology                 | • MiCare  |
| • Box Hill Institute                                 | • Access Health & Community                                   |
| • Holmesglen TAFE                                    | • Carrington Health   |
| • Deakin University Student Association (DUSA)       | • EACH  |
| • Study Melbourne                                    | • headspace Hawthorn  |
| • Council of International Students Australia (CISA) | • Boroondara Council  |
| • Department of Health and Human Services            | • Manningham Council  |
| • Centre for Holistic Health                         | • Manningham Youth Services                                   |
|  | • Monash Council  |
|  | • Whitehorse Council  |

## Other stakeholders

- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| • ABRISA Brazilian Association    | • St Tom's Hope Project                           |
| • IndianCare                      | • Story IS Connection                             |
| • Kingston Council                | • Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC)        |
| • Link Health & Community         | • Victorian Immigrant & Refugee Women's Coalition |
| • Rotary Club of Box Hill Burwood |   |

From early 2020 the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of international students and the higher education sector added urgency to the Partnership project, as the need for wider awareness of the plight of students and the importance of collective action to support student health and wellbeing was highlighted.

While the initial brief limited the project to the three universities in the Inner East, over time, connections were established with Holmesglen and Box Hill Institutes, allowing for experiences and challenges facing international students in the TAFE sector to be included. The involvement of local

government youth services also provided insights into the experiences of international students studying at secondary schools in the Inner East, through the School Focused Youth Services coordinators.

## Partnership Project Activities

This project was led by Kate Jeffery, Access and Inclusion Coordinator from the Inner East Primary Care Partnership, who also provided secretariat support for the partnership. Funding for the project was provided by the Department of Health and Human Services, as part of social inclusion initiatives of the IEPCP. Project activities included:

- Formal meetings of the partnership. Ten well attended meetings were held during 2020. These were conducted on Zoom, except for the first meeting in February. Facilitation and secretariat were provided by Kate Jeffery.
- Targeted meetings with individual partners and stakeholders, most of which were conducted on Zoom.
- Establishment of a working group of local councils
- Proactive outreach and networking
- Monitoring of media reporting on issues facing international students and the higher education sector during the pandemic
- Review and monitoring of the research evidence-base in regard to international students.
- Information dissemination and resource sharing
- Employment of an international student graduate, Souphaphone Thoommavongsa (Nang), to assist with the project and provide insights from lived experience (September-October 2020)
- Small focus group discussion with international students, primarily from Holmesglen Institute
- Participation in Study Melbourne webinars and other online forums, including research forums conducted by the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre
- Planning and delivery of an online forum, *Leaving No-One Out: International Students and Inclusion*, in collaboration with partners. The forum, held on 2 December, hosted by IEPCP, provided a platform to hear the voices of international students and international student advisers, and to showcase examples of best practice by community-based organisations for inclusion of international students.

The partnership has allowed the opportunity for local government and public health sector organisations to hear directly from higher education institutions and community agencies who were engaging with students, widening awareness of what was happening in the lives of international students. The partnership helped strengthen relationships and referral pathways into community-based health and support services and for partners to work together to identify opportunities to promote inclusion and connectedness for socially isolated students. These outcomes are discussed in Part 2 of this report.

## PART 2 THE PARTNERSHIP FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT INCLUSION

### How the partnership worked

This partnership was established by building new relationships and working with established connections. The initial brief for the project identified potential partners and stakeholders, based on past local engagement and knowledge of the region and the sectors. In other words, those who had a stake in the health, wellbeing, and social inclusion of international students in the Inner East catchment and had the influence or capacity to bring about change.

PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS			
Higher Education Institutions	Community Health Sector	Government/Local Government	Other
Deakin University Monash University Swinburne University of Technology Box Hill Institute Holmesglen Institute International student representative bodies	Access Health & Community Carrington Health EACH Link Health & Community headspace Hawthorn  Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health (CEH) IndianCare Centre for Holistic Health (CHH) Family Planning Victoria MiCare Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (MCWH) Women's Health East	DHHS Population Health and Community Wellbeing Department of Education Study Melbourne Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC)  Boroondara Council Manningham Council Monash Council Whitehorse Council	Centre for Multicultural Youth Eastern Health Eastern Melbourne PHN Eastern Volunteers Migrant Worker Centre Monash Health

While the term partnership has been used in this project, this was not a 'partnership' or entity in the sense that prospective partners were formally invited to participate at executive or senior management level or reached agreement via Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). Terms of reference were not developed for the group. The original project brief formed the primary guiding document for meeting and connecting. The urgency of responding to the emerging challenges facing international students as COVID-19 began to impact on their lives meant that less emphasis was placed on formalising procedures and processes governing the partnership, and on primary prevention initiatives, as the emphasis shifted to providing a platform for information sharing and developing rapid service coordination.

Hence the partnership functioned more as a coordinating body and network, which relied on identifying individuals in key positions who engage directly with international students or have an organisational responsibility for international students as part of supporting local communities (for example, officers in local government). Participation in the project centred around shared concerns and a willingness to collaborate on outcomes.

Individuals from potential partner organisations were approached directly, largely having been identified by the IEPCP or partner connections, to ascertain interest in participating in the project. In most instances, the response from organisations was enthusiastic and positive, leading to active and consistent involvement.

However, Agencies were also dealing with competing demands as the pandemic unfolded which impacted on the ability of some to maintain consistent involvement.

Ten meetings were held across the course of 2020, with all except the first meeting held in February, hosted on Zoom as the Pandemic unfolded. Separate meetings were held to discuss specific issues (a local government working group was established, for example), and meetings were also held to discuss planning for a forum in December 2020. This forum was hosted by IEPCP with an intention to engage an audience beyond partner organisations.

The partnership has provided a platform for stakeholders to come together to talk about issues of mutual concern, to hear updates about what was happening in the lives of international students at each of the higher education institutions and through accessing various services, and to discuss opportunities to work together to implement referral pathways for health and wellbeing support. There was significant expertise and knowledge across the partnership and a willingness to collaborate and find ways to improve outcomes for students. Some of the specific activities generated by the partnership are discussed later in this section.

## Contribution of Project Partners

### Higher Education

The original project brief focused on relationships with the three universities in the Inner East, Deakin, Monash, and Swinburne. Existing connections made this possible. The active and continuing involvement of the three universities was key to the success of this partnership. Representatives from each university made a vital contribution to wider understanding of the issues facing international students, and the importance of strengthening relationships beyond the boundaries of campuses with community-based organisations and the wider community. Later in 2020, relationships were also established with Holmesglen Institute and Box Hill Institute of TAFE.

International student engagement teams drew on their direct interactions with students, and often, from lived experience. All were proactive in reaching out to students including students offshore, to provide emotional and practical support, and to seek out opportunities to collaborate with health and community services and migrant community organisations. International student advisors (ISAs) were key advocates for the health and welfare of international students, addressing the plethora of challenges students were grappling with during the lockdowns: visa issues, learning and study challenges, access to food relief and care packages, developing online resources and activities to break down isolation and psychological distress, preparing orientation programs for new students each semester, and supporting students stranded offshore. ISAs were also assisting students seeking to return home, facing challenges with border closures, flight cancellations and spiralling costs of airfares.

Each higher education institution established hardship funding and emergency relief programs for their students, individually and in conjunction with Victorian Government's international student

emergency hardship relief fund administered by Study Melbourne. Institutions were also working with their preferred Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) insurance providers to strengthen health and wellbeing support for their international student populations.

### *Deakin University*

**Key contact:** Coby Liew, Senior International Student Support Officer, Student Health, Wellbeing and Support (Coby is no longer in this role as of May 2021)

**Other contacts:**

Melissa Yong, Health Promotion Coordinator, Division of Student Life – Student Orientation & Engagement

Helen Nicholls-Stary, Manager Specialist Student Support

Deakin University was involved in the project from its inception, with Melissa Yong contributing to the development of the project brief during 2019. Melissa participated in the first working group meeting in February, attended some subsequent meetings, and ultimately introduced Coby Liew as the Deakin representative in the project. Coby and his team have dedicated responsibility for supporting Deakin’s international students across campuses in Melbourne and Geelong.

### *Monash University*

**Key contact:** Param Arputhanathan, Acting Manager, International Student Engagement

**Other contacts:**

Associate Professor, Helen Forbes-Mewett, Discipline Head, Sociology and Deputy Director, Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre, and member of the VMC eastern regional advisory committee.

Hannah Key, International Student Engagement Advisor, Program Lead Monash Global Ambassador Program

Associate Professor Helen Forbes-Mewett was involved in initial conversations about the formation of the partnership and provided input to the project brief. She was unable to continue to be involved with the project as, the onset of COVID-19 forced a rapid transition to online teaching and support for students, including for the large contingent of international students stranded offshore.

### *Swinburne University of Technology*

**Key contacts:**

Bwe Thay, Migrant Program Coordinator, Office of Student Development

Desma Smith, Associate Director, International Student Advisory & Support, Student Support and Wellbeing

Marie Quetal, Senior International Student Adviser, Australia Awards Student Contact Officer, International Student Advisory & Support

Sharon Chan, International Student Adviser & Australia Awards Student Contact Officer, International Student Advisory & Support

**Other contact:**

Dr Sean Tinker, Manager, Student Development

Mr Bwe Thay was the initial contact for the partnership, having input to the development of the brief and attending the first working group meeting held in February 2020, and the majority of

subsequent meetings. As migrant program coordinator, Bwe was acutely aware of the challenges facing international and domestic students of migrant background. As a commissioner with the VMC, Bwe has been an important conduit for information and advocacy on behalf of international students. He has also brought wider connections and perspectives from Melbourne's multicultural communities to the partnership. In September 2020, Bwe was appointed as Deputy Chairperson of VMC.

Later in 2020, the Swinburne international student advisory and support team also became involved with the partnership, strengthening connections to ISA teams at other institutions, and joining planning and presentation of the December forum. Among other initiatives, the Swinburne international student advisory team is responsible for a project to improve food delivery rider safety, in conjunction with government and community partners.

### *Holmesglen Institute of TAFE*

#### **Key contacts:**

Tracy A'Hearn, International Student Support Manager, International Centre  
Carolyn Watters, International Student Counsellor, Student Wellbeing

Holmesglen Institute was introduced to the partnership in September 2020 by Souphaphone Thoommavongsa (Nang), a graduate of Holmesglen, and project support officer for IEPCP. Nang was the Holmesglen Outstanding International Student of the year for 2020, and a finalist in the International Alumnus of the Year award for 2020.

This connection provided the opportunity to draw insights into the experiences of international students studying in the TAFE system as well as extending the relationships with the higher education sector in the inner east region. The importance of having priority access referral pathways into local services was emphasised by the international student counselling team.

A small focus group discussion was held with students from Holmesglen, organised and facilitated by Nang. In June 2020 Nang initiated and led a sexual health conference for international students, supported by Holmesglen.

### *Box Hill Institute*

**Key Contact:** Nikita Singh, International Student Wellbeing Officer- Student Life

#### **Other Contacts:**

Johanna Dutton, Team Leader, International Student Wellbeing  
Simone Spicer, Executive Manager – Student Life  
John Qiu, General Manager | Vice President – International

Box Hill Institute joined the partnership in November 2020, further strengthening the relationships with the TAFE sector, and allowing for the differing needs of international students and institutional responses to be shared. Whitehorse Council and local agencies already have well developed relationships with Box Hill Institute; their participation in this partnership allows for more integration and potential collaboration with other international student advisory teams as well as with the broader community services sector.



## Student Representative Organisations

### *Council of International Students Australia (CISA)*

**Key contacts:** Kevin Marco Tanaya, National Secretary (current)

Varsha Devi Balakrishnan, National Secretary (past)

**Other contacts:**

Belle Lim, National President (current) - VIEA International Student of the Year (Premier's Award), and International Student of the Year - Research award 2019

Toolsika Rawoah, National Women's Officer

CISA is the peak national representative body for international students studying at postgraduate, undergraduate, private college, TAFE, ELICOS and foundation level Australian institutions. CISA was connected to the partnership through MiCare and Souphaphone Thoommavongsa (Nang), having previously hosted the sexual health conference led by Nang (Sarah Chong from MiCare was a speaker at that conference). National Secretary, Varsha Devi Balakrishnan, a Master of Counselling student at Monash University and finalist for the International Student of the Year - Higher Education award for 2020, became actively involved with the partnership, continuing in a volunteer capacity after her term as national secretary ended in September 2020.

The international student voice continues to be important in shaping responses by higher education institutions and community sector organisations. CISA was a key partner in the international student forum held in December 2020.

### *Deakin University Students Association (DUSA)*

**Key contact:** Shona Haddon, Financial Counsellor

DUSA has been represented in the partnership by Shona Haddon, who is employed as a financial counsellor with the student union. This connection came via Connie Chen, Deakin Student Legal Service (see below). DUSA had experienced a sharp rise ('*avalanche*') in the numbers of Deakin international students seeking help during the pandemic. DUSA covers Deakin campuses in Burwood, Geelong, and Warrnambool, and students studying online offshore.

DUSA was keen to establish closer working relationships to services in the community to better support international students.

### *Deakin Student Legal Service (DSLS)*

**Key contact:** Connie Chen, Coordinator, Deakin Student Legal Service (Connie is no longer in this role as of March 2021)

Eastern Community Legal Centre is contracted by DUSA to provide free legal advice information and referral services to students at Deakin. Participation in the partnership came via IEPCP connections to ECLC.

Dedicated legal services provided on campus provide advice and support in tenancy, employment, and migration law. Referrals through the Federation of Community Legal Services extends the reach of campus based legal services. Eastern Community Legal Centre was funded by Swinburne student union to run a pilot legal service at Swinburne one day a week during the second half of 2020.

## Victorian Government Agencies

### *Department of Health and Human Services (DFFH 2021)*

The project was funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, as part of funding received by the Inner East Primary Care Partnership for social inclusion initiatives. DHHS became directly involved in the partnership after discussions in early March 2020.

**Key Contact:** Annette Worthing, Manager, Population Health & Community Wellbeing, Inner Eastern Melbourne Area, East Division

**Other contact:** Jonathon Brown, then Senior Advisor, Population Health and Community Wellbeing for the Inner East, East Division. Jonathon was the initial contact for this project but was redeployed to work on Victoria's COVID-19 response.

Visa status does not prevent international students from accessing Victorian Government funded community services. DHHS representatives were keen to participate in the partnership to understand issues facing international students in relation to the services they fund. While competing priorities during the pandemic prevented regular participation in meetings, DHHS remained involved throughout, and provided input on broader government policies and programs, particularly regarding access for international students to community services.

Comprehensive notes of each meeting allowed for DHHS to be across the discussions and emerging issues and challenges for international students.

### *Study Melbourne*

**Key Contact:** Emma Last, Partnerships and Engagement Coordinator, International Education, Study Melbourne

Study Melbourne was introduced to the partnership by MiCare. Study Melbourne is part of the International Education Team within Global Victoria in the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.

Study Melbourne provides support to Victoria's international student population at universities, TAFEs and private training organisations, through the Study Melbourne Student Centre, which offers a mix of casework, information and advice, events, and activities, to improve student health and wellbeing and employability. Students can access legal advice on tenancy and accommodation issues, and employment.

Through the international student welfare grants program, Study Melbourne has partnered with a wide range of community-based organisations (including the Centre for Holistic Health) to support the mental health of international students and promote inclusion and connection with the broader community. Throughout 2020, Study Melbourne conducted a series of online webinars on a wide variety of topics.

Study Melbourne reported a 400 percent increase in students seeking help by August 2020.

Study Melbourne has continued to advocate for students, forming partnerships with key organisations to provide food and emergency relief. The Food Bank 'pop up pantry' in Melbourne is

one example of these partnerships. Study Melbourne administered the \$45 million Victorian Government emergency financial hardship relief program for international students in need.

Emma Last reported that the IEPCP's International Student Inclusion Partnership was unique in Victoria. She has particularly welcomed the opportunity to connect with local government. Study Melbourne was a key contributor to the international student forum.

## Community Sector

### *Access Health & Community*

#### **Key contacts:**

Lawrence Walsh, Community Engagement Advisor

Owen Pietsch, Senior Practitioner, Health Promotion

Fiona Read, Health Promotion Manager

Access HC is an independent not-for-profit community health service with sites across Boroondara and Manningham, including the Hawthorn site close to Swinburne's Hawthorn campus and the Ashburton site, close to Holmesglen's main campus in Chadstone. Community Health was always considered a key partner in this project, with some organisations like Access HC having existing strong relationships to higher education institutions. Access HC has provided outreach drug and alcohol counselling for young people at Swinburne University for several years. It was hoped that priority access warm referral pathways could be created from health and counselling staff at Holmesglen for international students to local community health services, including Access HC.

Access HC staff attended several partnership meetings in 2020. This included delivering a presentation in October 2020 about the Victorian Government's High Risk Accommodation Response (HRAR) program led by David Towl, General Manager, Health Promotion and Engagement (Covid lead) at Access HC. This program aimed to manage and reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission in shared housing, including public housing, supported residential services, rooming houses, hostels, community housing and caravan parks.

### *Carrington Health*

**Key contact:** Olive Aumann, General Manager Mental Health, AOD & Prevention

**Other contact:** Anna Gordon, Business Development Manager

Carrington Health is also an independent not-for-profit Community Health Service, based in Box Hill. While Carrington Health was involved in early conversations about the establishment of this partnership, Olive Aumann was not able to continue her involvement as the pandemic unfolded. Olive is chair of the Deakin University Health Advisory Board. Carrington Health also has existing links to Box Hill Institute.

As with other Community Health Services, international students can access Victorian Government-funded counselling services through Carrington Health. Carrington Health also offer an after-hours GP and mental health nurse service in Box Hill, which is free and available to everyone.

Carrington Health has supported local emergency relief programs, including the St Tom's Hope pantry in East Burwood through fundraising and donations.

Carrington Health has also been working closely with Access HC in the implementation of the HRAR Program across Boroondara, Manningham and Whitehorse.

### *Centre for Holistic Health*

**Key contact:** Ada Poon, Service Coordinator

The Centre for Holistic Health provides dedicated counselling and other psychological support services to the Chinese speaking communities and was a founding member of this partnership. CHH has been funded by Study Melbourne to provide mental health support for international students, through counselling, case management and workshops.

Past projects have included training of student ambassadors in Mental Health First Aid (Mandarin) in partnership with Monash University, Swinburne, and other higher education institutions.

By early May 2020, more than 7,800 international students had contacted CHH seeking advice and support (10 percent of students from a non-Chinese background). In July 2020, CHH received a further grant from Study Melbourne to provide emotional wellbeing support for Chinese international students across Victoria. CHH established online study groups for social connection and peer support, and groups and workshops for stress management, time management and resilience. Yoga and mindfulness sessions have also been held. A pilot student radio program was created to provide a platform for students to share their experiences and discuss strategies for managing their emotions. CHH has communicated and promoted these programs through WeChat and WhatsApp groups.

### *EACH*

**Key contacts:**

Sean Kearney, Community Engagement Officer, Inner East Melbourne

**Other contacts:**

Julie Blacker, Area Manager, EACH (Box Hill)

Rhianna Perkin, Manager Service Design Strategy, Development & Marketing, EACH

Grace He, Project Community Education and Promotion Worker, Chinese Peer Connection

EACH is one of Victoria's largest independent, not-for-profit community health services, delivering a diverse portfolio of clinical, and community-based, physical health, disability and mental health services and programs across the age spectrum. EACH provides services across Australia but is located primarily in Melbourne's east. International students are eligible for Victorian Government funded psychological and emotional support programs. These include counselling, Chinese Peer Connection, Gambler's Help, alcohol and other drugs counselling, family, and youth services.

During COVID-19, EACH has been conducting COVID screening clinics and supporting other Victorian Government pandemic response programs. EACH is responsible for the delivery of Partners in Wellbeing mental health program in the east and south east suburbs of Melbourne. Partners in Wellbeing initiative is a specific response to the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to provide support for people who have been particularly impacted socially, emotionally, and economically by the pandemic, to the detriment of their mental health. International students are eligible for this free service.

EACH also runs Gambler's Help, and Manningham Youth Services on behalf of Manningham Council (see below).

EACH became a key partner in this project following initial discussions in early March 2020. Connections to key staff came via IEPCP participation in the Eastern Region Community Engagement Interest Group.

### *EACH Gambler's Help (Eastern)*

#### **Key contacts:**

Kevin Chan, Counsellor, Gambler's Help North East, Inner Eastern (EACH)

Sean Kearney, Community Engagement Officer, Inner East Melbourne (as above)

EACH delivers the Gambler's Help programs for people who are at risk or experiencing gambling related harms in the Inner East region and across the eastern suburbs. Services include therapeutic counselling, financial counselling, peer support groups, and community education programs. EACH Gambler's Help has counsellors who speak a variety of community languages (Mandarin, Cantonese and Greek).

International students are considered a high-risk group for gambling related harms, online and in gambling venues, for a variety of reasons (differences in accessibility and regulatory environment compared with home countries, for example), with specific risks arising from isolation and addictive gaming habits during the lockdowns. EACH Gambler's Help has delivered workshops and community education programs in partnership with higher education institutions and was keen to strengthen these relationships and create opportunities for outreach to international students. Problem gambling is often not disclosed by students and is strongly linked to poor mental health.

EACH Gambler's Help Eastern representatives were active members of the partnership, contributing regularly to meetings, partnering in the delivery of workshops with other members of the group, and playing a significant role in the planning and delivery of the December forum.

### *Eastern Volunteers*

**Key contact:** Wayne Aitken, Project Volunteer, Volunteer Resource Services

**Other contact:** Vivienne Cunningham-Smith, CEO, Eastern Volunteers

Eastern Volunteers is one of the largest volunteer resource centres, providing support to volunteers and volunteer involving organisations across much of eastern Melbourne. Prior to this project IEPCP already had strong working relationships with Eastern Volunteers through various initiatives to promote inclusion through volunteering in the eastern region. Wayne Aitken from EV coordinates a project to provide placements for university students with community organisations. International students have been the primary student group seeking these placements. This placement project has partnered with Monash and Deakin universities, in particular with the Monash Ancora Imparo Student Leadership program and the Monash Minds Student Leadership program.

The onset of COVID-19 significantly disrupted the volunteer placement program. However, international students were recruited by Eastern Volunteers to participate in responsive outreach programs to support vulnerable isolated people in the community through Melbourne's lockdowns during 2020. The social connectedness, meaningful contribution and opportunity to practice English language skills provided valuable support for the students.

Eastern Volunteers was involved from the outset including participation in the original working group, which met in February 2020.

### *headspace Hawthorn*

**Key contact:** Lily Bourke, Community Engagement Worker (Lily is no longer in this role as of December 2020)

headspace Hawthorn was connected to the partnership via the Eastern Region Community Engagement Interest Group, and regularly attended meetings from April 2020. International students can access youth group activities at headspace and psychological counselling, although lack of access to Medicare has been particularly problematic for students with little income. headspace Hawthorn is co-located with other youth services at the Boroondara Youth Hub, run by Boroondara Council. The partnership provided the opportunity for headspace Hawthorn to strengthen their connections to the higher education sector and other community services (such as MiCare and Gambler's Help), plan joint activities, promote access to headspace programs and gain further insights into the challenges facing international students. Partners provided input and feedback on community resources in language being produced by headspace Hawthorn, to ensure messaging used a cultural lens.

headspace Hawthorn had received a grant from Boroondara Council for a cooking group involving international students in 2020. Unable to meet face to face, this project turned into creating a recipe book for students and other young people (Inner Peas).

### *MiCare*

**Key contact:** Sarah Chong, Monash Community Strengthening Worker (Sarah is no longer in this role as of February 2021, although she is still with MiCare)

MiCare provides aged care and community services and has long legacy of working with multicultural communities. MiCare began as DutchCare, merging with New Hope Foundation, which had a long history of delivering community and settlement services in the inner east and southern suburbs, as well as in Melbourne's west. MiCare was a founding partner to this project. MiCare's involvement with the partnership came about by a chance meeting in January 2020 to discuss the new portfolios of Sarah and another MiCare colleague, after some staffing changes at MiCare. Funded through a grant from Monash Council (extended for three years after June 2020), the community strengthening role has provided outreach support for migrant communities including international students, other temporary migrants, newly arrived migrants, refugees, and people seeking asylum, through casework, counselling, information and advice and advocacy.

MiCare's strong links into local multicultural and settlement services networks provided opportunities for collaboration, for information and community education sessions, as well as case management and counselling. Like other agencies, MiCare transitioned to online and telephone counselling, and conducting workshops online, through most of 2020.

MiCare initiated joint community education workshops during 2020, with other agencies in this partnership, including the higher education sector, and was a key contributor to the partnership and planning and delivery of the December Leaving No-One Out: International Students and Inclusion



forum. Sarah Chong acted as master of ceremonies for the forum and facilitated the international student advisor discussions.

## Local Government

Local government has an important role to play in promoting inclusion of international students into the broader community. Three of the municipalities in the Inner East are home to major higher education institutions (Swinburne University in City of Boroondara, Monash University Clayton Campus and the Glen Waverley campus of Holmesglen Institute in City of Monash, and Deakin University Burwood campus and Box Hill Institute in City of Whitehorse), while the main Holmesglen Institute campus in Chadstone sits on the borders of both Boroondara and Monash.

International students who live in the suburbs of Manningham, also travel to institutions to the North (Latrobe University, for example) and to neighbouring suburbs. In addition, international students attend state and private secondary schools and private training institutions in the Inner East catchment.

Research by Victoria University's Mitchell Institute highlighted how entwined international students are with local economies, due to concentrations in select suburbs.

The loss of international students' enrolments due to border closures negatively affects local businesses and communities through the loss of spending on retail, entertainment, and housing.<sup>18</sup> A later report from the Mitchell Institute highlighted losses of international student numbers in Clayton, Burwood, and Box Hill.<sup>19</sup>

Local councils actively promote social inclusion through municipal public health and wellbeing policy implementation and by hosting community events and activities. Councils provide services in health and wellbeing, for youth and families, including maternal and child health. Access to many council services is not limited to residents, but are open to people who may work, study, or visit the municipality.

Local councils can significantly influence community attitudes and thus make a significant difference to the experience of international students in their communities. For example, councils have been promoting anti-racism, gender equality and prevention of violence against women programs. All councils in the Inner East have been proactive during the pandemic in leading and coordinating community support for vulnerable community members, through outreach and partnership with interfaith organisations, migrant communities, and local service clubs.

### Boroondara Council

#### Key contacts:

Emma Wilkinson, Social Inclusion & Policy Officer

Tamar Spatz, School Focused Youth Service Coordinator

The resident international student population in Boroondara in 2019 was estimated at almost 6,500, falling by around 1,400 as the pandemic unfolded. Boroondara Council officers were invited to join

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<sup>18</sup> Hurley, P, "Interactive: international students make up more than 30% of population in some Australian suburbs", The Conversation, 15 June 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Hurley, P (2020). *Coronavirus and international students*. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, Melbourne



the partnership, introduced by counterparts at Whitehorse council. Council's youth hub, 360 Youth Centre, is co-located with headspace Hawthorn, and offers opportunities to engage with students at Swinburne. International students are included in Council's multicultural community portfolio. Swinburne is represented on the Boroondara Youth Advisory Committee by Desma Smith, Associate Director, International Student Advisory & Support. Touch points for supporting international students include working with rooming house operators, as Emma Wilkinson reported that many international students live in rooming houses in Boroondara.

In addition, Boroondara Council works closely with schools across the municipality to support international students at secondary schools, through the School Focused Youth Service program. Discussions with the School Focused Youth Service coordinator Tamar Spatz provided in depth insights into the challenges facing secondary school-aged international students, many of whom live in HomeStay accommodation. Part 3 of this report summarises some of the issues that students have faced with remote learning and isolation, and rising levels of anxiety and depression, during Melbourne's lockdowns.

Boroondara expressed strong interest in workshops being held to bring together schools, students, and agencies to specifically address concerns about underage international students across the region, as part of the work of this partnership. Tamar Spatz highlighted the gap in community-based support available to international students in secondary schools. (secondary school aged international students are not part of Study Melbourne's remit, for example).

Boroondara Council has partnered with EACH Chinese Peer Connections and the Centre for Multicultural Youth to develop resources and to provide support for international students at secondary schools. This program was featured as an example of best practice in the international student forum (see below).

### *Manningham Council*

**Key contact:** Katrine Gabb, Community Development Officer (Access and Inclusion)

In 2019, Manningham had just over 3,000 international students living in the municipality.

The Mitchell Institute calculated students stranded offshore had declined to 2,200 students by mid-2020. International students also attend secondary schools in Manningham: Doncaster and East Doncaster Secondary Colleges, for example, have significant numbers of underage international students.

Manningham Council was connected to the partnership through IEPCP membership of the Manningham Access and Equity Advisory Committee. While the timing of meetings during the pandemic made regular attendance difficult, Manningham Council remained committed to the partnership and hosted the first meeting of the local government working group.

Manningham Council staff were proactive in reaching out to multicultural communities during the pandemic and promoting access to care packages and emergency relief, including for international students.

## *Manningham Youth Services (EACH)*

### **Key contacts:**

Chris Milne, Coordinator, Manningham Youth Services (EACH)

Simone Webbey, Youth Engagement Worker, Manningham Youth Services

Since July 2019, EACH has been providing Manningham Youth Services under contract to Manningham Council. Manningham Youth Services is establishing an International Student Support Club for international students who live or are connected to the Manningham municipality. The aim is to provide opportunities “to connect with like-minded people, connect with local professionals, feel valued by the community they live in and have direct access to the support services they require.” International students would also have a role in planning of events and activities. Manningham Youth Services is also keen to connect international students in the higher education sector with international students at local secondary schools, for mentoring and support. Manningham Youth Services also runs the local School Focused Youth Service.

These initiatives are great examples of the way in which international students can be more included in local communities and build connections to other young people.

## *Monash Council*

### **Key contacts:**

Pamela Kosij, Multicultural Community Development Officer

Sammy King, Senior Youth Worker, Monash Youth Services

**Other contact:** Siobhan Wood, Community Wellbeing Coordinator

Mitchell Institute calculated that 18,413 international students were living in Monash in 2019 with a significant concentration in Clayton. By mid-year, the number of students resident in Monash had dropped to an estimated 15,408. Students were also living in neighbouring suburbs to the south, in Kingston (Clayton South) and Greater Dandenong, highlighting the population movement across local government boundaries and across the city. In recognition of this, Monash and Kingston councils work closely together in responding to the needs of multicultural communities.

Monash was an early member of the International Student Inclusion Partnership with strong existing links to Monash University, and to the local services sector and migrant communities through networks such as the Monash Multicultural & Settlement Services Network, the Monash Interfaith Gathering and the Monash Multicultural Advisory Committee. Monash is one of the most culturally diverse municipalities in Melbourne, with significant Chinese communities (at the 2106 Census, almost a quarter of residents identified as having a Chinese background). Council quickly activated a community response team after the onset of the pandemic and put in place an anti-racism program in response to rising incidents of racism on the community. Cultural Awareness and Say No To Racism Training workshops were conducted in June, together with messaging through Council communication platforms and community ambassadors.

With funding from the Victorian Government, the **Monash Community Connector** program was developed, to support and provide referrals for social, emotional, and practical needs, for people, including international students, experiencing hardship and isolation during the pandemic. This project is being coordinated by Siobhan Wood from the City of Monash.

**Monash Youth Services** provides free youth counselling and support for young people who live, work, study or play in Monash. This service is open to international students. MYS also runs events and programs, such as ACTIVATE, for youth aged 10-17 years of age in Ashwood/Chadstone, and the School Focused Youth service for students who are vulnerable or at risk of disengaging from education. Collaboration between council youth services is a desired outcome of the international student partnership project.

### *Whitehorse Council*

#### **Key contacts:**

Sarah Martinelli, Community Development Officer - Diversity

Bronwyn Upston, Community Development Officer - Health and Wellbeing

Zoey Deane, School Focused Youth Services Coordinator (Zoey is no longer in this role as of February 2021)

Whitehorse Council officers joined the partnership via IEPCP contact through membership of council working groups. Whitehorse Council had identified international students as a key population group with concerns around community safety, racism, and violence against women. International students have also been volunteers and participants in Whitehorse youth programs.

International students have constituted a significant component of Whitehorse's multicultural communities; in 2019, almost 11,000 students lived in Whitehorse, while many thousands more travelled across the city to study at Deakin University and Box Hill Institute. In addition, local secondary schools also host international students. The Mitchell Institute calculated that resident international student numbers had dropped by almost 3,000 in Whitehorse because of the pandemic.

Council officers were keen to connect with international students and the higher education sector to better understand the challenges they face. Council was actively involved in promoting access to emergency hardship relief for international students and other vulnerable community members, through relationships with local church groups, service organisations and community information and support services (CIS).

Whitehorse Youth Services works closely with neighbouring council youth services through the School Focused Youth Service programs and is keen to extend this collaboration to better support international students.

Whitehorse council hosted the second working group meeting of local councils, as part of this partnership.

## **Other Stakeholders Consulted**

### *ABRISA Brazilian Association*

Alba Chliakhtine, Executive Officer

also Chair of the Victorian Immigrant & Refugee Women's Coalition

Conversations were held with ABRISA, in regard to concerns over the hardship being faced by international students from Brazil and Columbia, many of whom were studying at registered training

colleges and receiving less support than students in the university and TAFE institutions. Connections were made to EACH for students to receive counselling and support.

### *IndianCare*

Jaya Manchikanti, President, IndianCare

Dr Jyothsna Rao, International Student Welfare Program (ISWP) Coordinator, Project SASS

IndianCare Inc is a not-for-profit organisation set up to support people of Indian origin in Victoria. IndianCare provides a diverse range of welfare services, including information, advice and referrals, advocacy, and psycho-social support and counselling. IndianCare was funded by the Victorian Government to operate a community assistance hotline to support South Asian communities during Melbourne's second lockdown, covering emotional distress, financial hardship, advice, and referrals for emergency relief, need for social connection and information about COVID-19 restrictions and testing.

IndianCare plays a key role in supporting international students of South Asian background. IndianCare is the lead agency in Project SASS (South Asian Student Support) supporting South Asian international students from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. The program is student-led and is supported by Study Melbourne's International Student Welfare Program and the Victorian Government. Partners to this project include five universities (Melbourne, RMIT, Latrobe, Federation and Victoria Universities) and Indian community organisations. In addition to wellbeing, social connections and practical support, the project has an emphasis on mentoring for work readiness and career pathways.

This important initiative is a good example of what is possible through partnering with tertiary institutions and migrant community organisations to support students from home countries. Project SASS was presented as an example of good practice at the international student forum.

### *Kingston Council*

Amara Hamid, Westall Hub Community Strengthening Coordinator

The Westall Hub is located in Clayton South. Given the number of international students living in Clayton South and Clarinda, contact was made with Amara Hamid to share information about the partnership and emergency relief responses.

### *LinkHC/Latrobe Health & Community*

As one of the Community Health Services in the Inner East, Link HC has an important role to play in supporting international students within its catchment. Working relationships already exist with Monash University Clayton campus, with an MOU to provide outreach alcohol and other drugs counselling and generalist counselling to students and staff, including international students. During 2020, Link HC was going through a merger with Latrobe Community Health, which resulted in an internal restructure and therefore was unable to send a representative to the the partnership at the time. Link HC was able to be part of the joint presentation of the HRAR program in October, along with Access HC and Carrington Health, having responsibility for this program in Monash.

## Story IS Connection

Feifei Liao, Managing Director, Story Is Connection

Feifei Liao is also currently Project Officer at Whittlesea City Council overseeing the planning, development, and delivery of an international student wellbeing hub, to provide support for international students and enhance inclusion and connections to local services and the community.

Link HC staff provided the referral to Story Is Connection and Feifei Liao. Link HC has partnered with artistic director of Story Is Connection, Catherine Simmonds, in workshops and theatre performances for *Three Sides of the Coin*. Story Is Connection uses creative workshops and performance to empower international students through storytelling, with students building connection and sense of identity through sharing of personal experiences, and strengths and vulnerabilities.

*Act of Translation-She'll be Right*, and *Be You Be Scene* allowed students to reflect on their lives as international students in Melbourne and address the stereotypes about being an international student and their hopes, challenges and aspirations for life through performance. More recent works have included *LIMBO* and *The Gift of Stories*, enabling international students to talk about their experiences during COVID-19. Story Is Connection is currently partnering with the Immigration Museum in an exhibition on the lives of international students, *Forget the Stereotypes*.

Story Is Connection highlights the diversity of international students, and the importance of seeing the individual beyond the label. Feifei Liao, who has been both a participant and project manager in the creative work of Story Is Connection, co presented with Story Is Connection marketing strategist, Thu Nguyen, at the international student forum.

## Benefits of the Partnership

### **Providing a cross sectoral platform for sharing understandings about the experiences and challenges of international students, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic**

International student engagement teams, other higher education staff, CISA, student support services and agencies working directly with international students were able to provide information and regular updates on the specific challenges facing international students as the pandemic unfolded. While some of these impacts were known through media reporting, those directly interacting with international students were able to offer insights and nuance not readily apparent to those outside the higher education sector. This helped bring to the fore the urgency of the situation, the extreme hardships being experienced, and the complexities of life for students from widely varying backgrounds. Breaking down the stereotypes and hearing individual stories and struggles provided urgency to the need for community support.

Similarly, school focused youth services coordinators could provide insights into the specific challenges facing secondary school aged international students.

## **Education sector sharing responses and good practise**

The partnership enabled connections to be established with the three universities and the two TAFE institutions in the Inner East, opening up the possibilities for collaboration.

The meetings provided a regular forum for international student engagement teams and other higher education staff to connect with each other, to share information about the status of their students, and the specific responses and initiatives being taken by each institution. This included best practice approaches, and relationships with community organisations and migrant community groups in providing hardship and food relief.

## **Connecting the mainstream health and community service sector and the higher education sector**

Several of the health and community partners had limited engagement with international students and with the higher education sector.

For other services, the partnership strengthened existing connections: for example, MiCare with Monash University, headspace Hawthorn with Swinburne and other universities. Sharing service delivery information enabled referral pathways to become established.

The partnership also broadened the reach for some community-based services. For example, the Centre for Holistic Health had relationships with some higher education institutions. CHH participation in the partnership allowed for wider awareness and referrals to CHH programs for Chinese speaking international students across the sector.

In turn, the partnership provided the opportunity to promote access to community services that international students are eligible to use but are often not aware of. For example, access to free or low-cost community health services. The partnership also allowed for discussion about the barriers that face international students in accessing these services, whether a lack of knowledge about availability, or the perception that such services are for citizens only, or are not considered inclusive and understanding of their needs.

Access Health and Community, Carrington Health and Link Health and Community used the platform provided by the partnership to disseminate information about the Victorian Government's HRAR program and to seek the input and assistance of the higher education sector to refer to them, and agencies like Eastern Community Legal Centre. The discussion in relation to the HRAR program highlighted some gaps, around shared private rental housing and informal rooming houses.

EACH Gambler's Help was seeking to establish a closer working relationship with the universities and other higher education providers for outreach counselling and community education, which was enabled through the Partnership.

## **Connecting community-based services with each other**

The partnership provided the opportunity to establish relationships or to strengthen existing working relationships between agencies. For example, MiCare with EACH Gambler's Help; local council officers with common interests in addressing the needs of international students; local council officers with community sector agencies; CHH with other service providers; EACH with other

service providers in the inner east; ECLC with other providers. In addition, it was possible to promote awareness of services and referrals to external organisations such as IndianCare, for students of South Asian background. ABRISA was also linked with EACH through this partnership.

Connection between community agencies and councils allowed agencies to understand how councils are working to make changes within their communities to bring about change on systemic issues such as racism, that impact the daily life of international students. Councils were also able to hear about the experiences of international students, which in turn will inform their planning

### **Finding entry points for engagement with international students**

Agencies reported the difficulties of finding ways to engage with international students. The promotion of health and wellbeing or support services during Orientation has limited impact, due to the overwhelming amount of information students are presented with and likelihood that services and programs will not be remembered from this time.

Agencies, including council services, were looking for greater opportunity to promote awareness of and access to services (for example, Gambler's Help, council youth services, community health, headspace Hawthorn). Relationships with international student engagement teams brokered by this project offered the potential to reach students through university and TAFE news bulletins and social media platforms, as well as providing an opportunity for collaboration. International student advisors emphasised their role as the point of contact with agencies wanting to connect with the international student population.

### **Wider awareness of Victorian Government policies and initiatives in support of international students during COVID-19**

The partnership provided a consistent point of contact with Study Melbourne and the DHHS. The partnership had the dual purpose of providing updates and advocacy to DHHS on the impacts on international students via the meetings and notes of meetings as well as hearing in detail from Study Melbourne about the initiatives being taken to support international students.

This included the information about:

- the Victorian Government's hardship relief program, being administered by Study Melbourne,
- access to rent relief and the Working for Victoria program,
- Study Melbourne grants programs,
- access to emergency food relief and practical support,
- access to Victorian Government initiatives providing free masks for people at risk,
- mental health initiatives such as Partners in Wellbeing and
- funding for Orygen to provide secondary consults for staff at tertiary institutions supporting international students who were experiencing psychological distress.

### **Sharing of specialist knowledge and expertise**

The importance of adopting a cultural lens in working with international students was a subject of in-depth discussions in the partnership meetings. The importance of meaningful communication in first languages, understanding different cultural interpretations of health and wellbeing, socio-



cultural barriers to help seeking, providing environments where students of different backgrounds would feel safe, welcomed, included and understood, were all highlighted. As Varsha Devi Balakrishnan suggested, cultural competency should be mandatory for community services.

These discussions helped inform approaches to the development of resources for example at headspace Hawthorn. Discussions about platforms for communication, ways of engaging with students also had potential to influence practice and service delivery.

There are many examples of sharing of specialist knowledge between project partners.

- Deakin Student Legal Service provided nuanced information around tenancy, employment and migration law for students experiencing housing insecurity, employment exploitation and insecure visa status.
- MiCare highlighted employment exploitation as a commonly raised issue, including from within migrant communities.
- EACH Gambler's Help provided insights into specific risks for international students of problem gambling and addictive gaming habits.
- Deakin University Students Association shared experiences of financial hardship facing international students.
- CISA gave important insights into mental health, and ways of connecting and communicating with students around life stressors and distress, and stressed the need for resources for students that are easy to navigate.
- CHH shared approaches being used to promote peer support and connections to reduce isolation and emotional stress for students of Chinese background.

### **Collaboration in prevention**

During the course of 2020, partners planned and delivered joint activities with a preventive focus, including workshops in responses to international student needs.,

For example, MiCare and EACH Gambler's Help partnered to run three sessions for migrants, refugees and international students including Money Matters, supported by EACH Gambler's Help financial counsellors, Mind Centre Money and Gaming to Gambling workshops.

Agencies invited each other to contribute to and support each other's prevention focused events, for example, Whitehorse Youth Forum, at which headspace Hawthorn provided an information forum. Gambling Harm Awareness Week activities were being planned in collaboration with other partners, including higher education institutions, within the limitations of a crowded online environment for students.

Three Sides of the Coin, gambling harm prevention initiative from Link HC was showcased at Swinburne.

### **Sharing of partner information and resources**

A consistent feature of the partnership was sharing of other partner information and resources. For example, notification of upcoming events, service information, promotion of Study Melbourne webinars, dedicated resources on key topics. Including, gambling and mental health from

headspace Hawthorn, DSLS legal information webinar for international students, legal resources from ECLC in language on scams and other issues of concern, information on services available to international students.

### **A focus on social inclusion as a health and wellbeing determinant**

The partnership was aligned around the importance of international student health and wellbeing, and understood that inclusion and acceptance by mainstream community, by Australian student peers, and in policy decisions that provide essential services and support, are vital to prevent poor mental health outcomes, racism, exploitation and discrimination and violence. Where structural barriers with inclusion and acceptance were identified, agencies acted quickly to meet service gaps where able, working separately and collaboratively to support international students.

It is noted that Social Inclusion is a high priority health and wellbeing issue for PCP partners across the Eastern metropolitan region, with activity occurring in addition to International Student focussed work. This project has highlighted the opportunity to explore how other prevention work can link to ongoing work of the Inner East International Student Inclusion Partnership.

## PART 3 INSIGHTS FROM THE PARTNERSHIP ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT WELLBEING

Over the course of 2020, IEPCP partners shared important insights into the lives of international students. The IEPCP aimed to capture discussions of this unique group of organisational representatives, each bringing a specialised focus about international student experience to the table, including a commitment to action and codesign of solutions through the collaboration.

Insights were also drawn directly from lived experience, including the personal experiences of current and former international students supporting the partnership and a small focus group discussion conducted in October with five international students, four of whom attended Holmesglen Institute and one, a private training organisation. A panel of seven international students also provided personal insights as part of the *Leaving No-One Out: International Students and Inclusion* forum held in December 2020.

The companion paper, *International Students and COVID-19: Timeline of Impacts* provides further insights into the impacts over time, as reported in the media and academic research.

### Students most at risk

While most students experience the usual challenges associated with life as an international student in Melbourne, the pandemic intensified life stressors, as the media monitoring and research has shown (see companion report available from the [IEPCP website](#)). Not least is the concern of students about the situation in their home countries, and anxiety and distress about the fate of their families and communities. The capacity of families to provide financial support to students in Australia has been significantly compromised by the economic fallout of the pandemic across the globe.

Emerging risks for international students during the COVID-19 pandemic identified were:

- Heightened risks of depression, anxiety, psychological distress and deteriorating emotional wellbeing.
- Fear and uncertainty over the health risks associated with the pandemic, fears for family members and communities in home countries
- Increased exposure to racism and xenophobia
- Isolation and loneliness
- Financial insecurity, loss of employment, limited support from families in home countries; feeling unable to share hardship with families also experiencing hardship
- Housing insecurity, risk of homelessness, overcrowding in shared housing
- Insufficient income for daily living needs, including food and other essentials
- Risk of disconnection from the wider community, peers, and social support networks
- Risk of disconnection from universities and education providers
- Risk of disengagement from course of study, exacerbated by difficulties with remote learning
- Risk of developing online gaming addictions
- Potential risks of online gambling addiction
- Vulnerability to financial scams

- Growing personal indebtedness
- Barriers to accessing health and wellbeing support
- Visa insecurity
- Increased vulnerability to housing and employment exploitation
- Fracturing of relationships and friendships, particularly in overcrowded shared housing
- Risks of violence, bullying and intimidation in home settings.

Some student cohorts were identified by the partnership as being particularly at risk of extremely high psychological distress and falling into situations of poverty.

## SUMMARY OF STUDENTS AT RISK

### NEWLY ARRIVED INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, COMMENCING STUDIES IN MELBOURNE

- social isolation, disconnected from local communities, homesickness
- few local connections and supports
- rapid transition to online learning and a virtual world, without chance to adjust to curriculum demands and teaching styles
- limited time to get to know other household members in shared housing; risks of misunderstandings and conflict, being forced into each other's company by the lockdown
- have family income support, although families in home countries are also impacted by the pandemic and may not be able to provide sufficient funds to cover living and tuition expenses
- unable/reluctant to share concerns with family offshore
- more limited opportunities to improve English language skills
- unfamiliarity with academic teaching styles
- unfamiliarity with Australian society, health systems
- concerns about racism
- accessing information about COVID-19 that is meaningful
- capacity to self-isolate and maintain physical distancing in shared housing.

**Notes:** Newly arrived students must learn to navigate life in an unfamiliar city - students come from a diverse range of backgrounds and countries and may have limited knowledge of Australia and Melbourne on arrival.

Levels of English language competency will vary, particularly for new arrivals who may be commencing English language studies before progressing to courses in higher education. Orientation during the pandemic was particularly disrupted, complicating the opportunities for students to adjust to life in Melbourne, to familiarise themselves with the higher education institution they are attending, the city itself, and even their local neighbourhoods. On arrival, students may not know how to open a bank account, access public transport (with risks of travelling without a valid Myki card and being fined), negotiate with landlords, understand local road rules, and traffic conditions (including parking restrictions and fines), and access credible local information. Seeking help may be complicated by a lack of confidence,

reluctance for cultural or personal reasons, or importantly, lack of knowledge about where and how to get help, through the higher education institution or in the community. Newly arrived international students are faced with an overwhelming amount of information that they need to digest, understand, and consider its relevance to their circumstances. This includes understanding how the Overseas Health Care Cover works: what is covered, and how they can access cover, which can be particularly challenging in emergency situations.

### RETURNING STUDENTS

- rapid transition to online learning
- delayed arrival due to quarantine requirements (for some)
- inconsistent access to broadband
- adapting to changed delivery of learning modules (online, not face to face)
- loss of casual employment to supplement finances
- loss of course work placements due to restrictions and closure of workplaces; delays in course completion and graduation
- lack of an income safety net
- ineligibility for Australian Government financial support (JobKeeper or JobSeeker)
- increasing stress associated with meeting daily living needs.
- disconnection with established peer networks and activities
- difficulties in paying course fees
- difficulties maintaining enrolment and meeting course requirements due to life stressors
- stress in sustaining rental accommodation; risks of eviction and homelessness.
- dependency on food donations from organisations like Foodbank and community groups.
- difficulties in maintaining health insurance through the Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC), a requirement of their student visa
- barriers to accessing health care
- increased incidents of racism
- increased health risks arising from overcrowded housing with students moving into shared housing to save money
- risks of exploitation in housing and employment
- barriers to accessing healthcare

**Notes:** Loss of employment and stress associated with insufficient income to cover basic living costs may not have been disclosed to their families, with students being concerned not to be a burden when families are also going through hardship at home. Students may have been supplementing family income in home countries through their casual employment. For many there may be a sense of shame and failure, being forced to rely on charity for food and other necessities. This was seen to be particularly a problem for post-graduate students, who are accustomed to being independent and self-reliant, and can cause students to internalize the stress they are experiencing.

Some students were not eligible for Victorian Government emergency relief fund because they could not demonstrate that they had lost income, having been employed as casuals and paid in cash, as part of the black economy, or because employers have not provided or maintained employment records.

International students who have had face to face learning in the past expressed concerns about the high fees they were continuing to pay for a reduced learning experience, with limited interaction with lecturers and other students. Challenges with online learning in shared housing, with limited private space for study and competing demands for use of the internet were also highlighted in the focus group discussion.

#### **GRADUATE STUDENTS UNABLE TO RETURN TO HOME COUNTRIES**

- unable to return to home countries due to rising airfares, no flights and border closures
- did not qualify for Victorian Government emergency relief funds for enrolled students
- unable to gain or have lost employment
- did not qualify for Australian Government financial support
- faced visa insecurity with delayed departure, unable to be supported by families
- additional costs of visa extensions, bridging visas
- may not have disclosed their situation to their families
- difficulties maintaining private health cover.

**Notes:** Recent graduates were particularly at risk because they did not qualify for any of the hardship grants programs which require students to be actively enrolled in a course. Limited financial resources put rising airfares out of reach. As experienced by other international students, families and communities in home countries were also being impacted by the pandemic, with loss of employment and other hardships; this has limited the capacity to call on family for assistance.

Crucially the changed environment also limited opportunities to obtain work in fields related to their qualifications, which has implications for qualifying for the two-year temporary graduate visa (sub-class 485), in either the graduate work stream or the post study work stream.

#### **ENROLLED INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STRANDED IN HOME COUNTRIES**

- uncertainty about their future life trajectories and timing of return to Australia
- ability to maintain academic engagement, and course completion
- inability to undertake work placements as part of course requirements
- concerns about the cost of courses now available only online
- obstacles to learning online: capacity to connect into online learning problematic for many, with uneven access to internet connection. adapting to changes in the way in which courses are delivered
- concerns about successful completion of courses, particularly for those with course requirements for workplace placements

- visa insecurity for those who are seeking to work in Australia upon completion of their courses: requirement to be onshore to apply for graduate visas
- concerns about rented housing and obligations to meet rental payments, breaking leases, bond refunds
- emotional and financial support from family and friends but loss of independence
- changed trajectories around life aspirations
- loss of connections and friendship networks in Melbourne.

Students unable to travel to Australia to continue their studies have expressed considerable concern about their futures. The continuing uncertainty over the possible return of international students to Melbourne will make this a significant issue in 2021.

### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- increased vulnerability of secondary school students as adolescents and teenagers living through a time of crisis
- many lack immediate family support in Australia, some living independently in shared housing, others with host families
- heightened fears around health and safety of family in home countries
- anxiety about personal health risks associated with the coronavirus
- concerns about capacity of parents and families to maintain income support
- challenges in transition to home-based learning for secondary schools
- household dynamics may become more complex in shared housing or with host families due to school closures and remote learning
- dependence on schools and peers for emotional support
- care and consent issues around underage students having to go into quarantine
- accessing meaningful information about the changing coronavirus situation and local restrictions during lockdown
- students being unable to return to home countries to be with their families at the end of the school year.

**Notes:** Although international students at secondary schools share the same stressors in adapting to remote learning as other secondary school students, the absence of close emotional support from family has the potential to intensify feelings of loneliness and home sickness. Many may not disclose this distress to host families or others in shared housing. The combined pressures of an entire household being locked down from an extended period, and general anxiety about the health risks associated with exposure to the coronavirus, increased risk of fracturing of relationships with host families. Host families may have also lost employment and faced insecure futures. International students may feel they are a burden as outsiders to the family unit.

### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WITH DEPENDENTS



- loss of supplementary income from casual employment has had wider impacts for international students who have families and dependents
- no access to Australian Government income support (JobKeeper/JobSeeker)
- post graduate students on scholarships may not have sufficient income if partner has lost employment
- difficulties meeting costs for rent, food, and other necessities for family members, often including young children, place extra pressures on the main visa holder
- added stress of maintaining enrolment and academic performance, at the same time dealing with the fears and anxieties of family members
- school-aged children unable to attend schools because of school closures, needing supervision and support
- remote learning for children also creates challenges around internet access and usage for all family members
- Disrupted access to health care and other community support services due to the lockdown (for example, maternal and child health care, childcare, playgroups)
- family dynamics under stress due to lockdown for COVID-19 and loss of employment
- barriers to accessing healthcare
- international students on scholarships may not have sufficient income to provide for all living costs for a family, without supplementing their scholarship fund.

#### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT PRIVATE TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

- more limited financial support from smaller colleges and institutions
- concerns about viability and continuity of courses, as training institutions come under increasing financial stress
- limited access to deferral or waiver of fees
- limited dedicated health and wellbeing support at private training institutions
- barriers in accessing healthcare
- many lack income support from families due to situations in home countries
- loss of employment widespread with no income safety net
- share same risks as other returning students.

**Notes:** While out of scope for this project, partners and stakeholders have highlighted the specific wellbeing risks of students enrolled at in private training institutions. Many international students enrolled in private training institutions have not had access to the same levels of support as students at the universities or TAFEs. This includes vocational education and training providers, independent higher education providers, and private English language colleges.

## Emerging Risks and Challenges

The summary below is provided to highlight key emerging risks and challenges as reported by project partners.

### SUMMARY OF EMERGING RISKS AND CHALLENGES and SOME CURRENT RESPONSES

#### MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

- High levels of psychological distress widely recognised as a significant risk for international students prior to Covid-19.<sup>20</sup>
- Stress and anxiety and other life stressors associated with this pandemic has contributed to reported spikes in mental health concerns about international students.<sup>21</sup>
- Enforced social isolation from campus, restrictions on socialising in the community, loss of employment and incidents of racism and exclusion have exacerbated outsider status of international students and undermined a sense of belonging, safety, and trust in the Australian community.
- The lockdown and remote learning increased barriers to social engagement and interactions with wider society in students already facing isolation from domestic students and local communities.
- Emotional distress, depression and anxiety trigger other problems. Students who are struggling to maintain academic performance often internalise stress and do not reach out for help. This raised concerns about the risks of disengagement and further spiralling of problems around emotional wellbeing and poor mental health.
- Reaching out to families in these circumstances is often difficult, because of shame of failure, not meeting parental or community expectations, parents not understanding the country context and challenges of life and study in Melbourne, or because students do not want to burden families at a time when they are struggling too.

Lack of access to appropriate mental health service. Partners to this project, including university staff and community agencies, have frequently drawn attention to the need for increased access to mental health supports, including through outreach. Stakeholders have also stressed the importance of mental health supports that are culturally relevant and in language.

#### Current responses

- Promotion of access to community based mental health services, including counselling and other wellbeing services provided by community health services across Melbourne, has been a key driver of this partnership initiative.
- In recognition of the mental health risks of Covid 19 to international students, the Victorian Government established a targeted mental health initiative engaging Orygen to establish an advice line to support counselling and wellbeing staff working in the

<sup>20</sup> Forbes-Mewett, H. (2020). *International students and mental health*. Research Brief: 02/June 2020, Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre, Monash University, Clayton. See discussion in Part 1.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

international education sector across Victoria, including international student peer workers and staff from Study Melbourne. The advice line offers secondary consultation and practice support, with clinical advice provided by senior clinicians from Orygen. Note that this is not direct counselling for student. The program includes recruitment of 40 peer workers to provide more support for international students.

- This initiative needs to be complemented by wider access to counselling and other wellbeing services provided by mainstream health and community services.
- Prevention and early intervention approaches are crucial, along with timely access to clinical services. Social inclusion is a protective factor that can help reduce risks of poor mental health.

### **FINANCIAL INSECURITY**

- Exclusion of international students from Federal Government income support during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Challenges accessing the basics for daily living: queues for food, deliveries of groceries and prepared meals by community-based organisations, and soup kitchens are testament to how international students are struggling to meet their most basic needs at this time.
- Students left without income support faced pressures to work in high risk, casualised employment, for example, as food delivery riders, or as security guards, or in aged care.
- Feeling compelled to continue to work to maintain income despite the risks and anxiety about contracting the coronavirus, whilst working in exposed environments.

#### **Current responses**

- Community based groups have fundraised to help international students meet costs of rent and other bills.
- There was consensus among the partners that all people living in Australia during this pandemic should be supported. This is fundamentally in public interest during a public health crisis, as well as being a humane response to individual need.
- IEPCP partners believed that international students were owed a duty of care by our society.
- Insecure work and lack of an income safety net were recognised by the Victorian Government as drivers of community transmission of the coronavirus. Paid pandemic leave was introduced to provide for those with no workplace leave, to ensure they did not work while waiting for a test result or having to self-isolate if the test is positive. There was no visa restriction on pandemic leave in Victoria.

### **HOUSING INSECURITY**

- Struggling with tenancies during the Covid 19 pandemic, including students with tenancy agreements who were still offshore in their home countries.
- Financial insecurity carried risks of homelessness: there were reports of evictions, couch surfing and overcrowded shared housing.

- Despite the announcements regarding rent reductions and a ban on evictions during the lockdown, many students did not know how to request rent reductions, and often, landlords were not willing to provide rent reductions.
- Landlords were also in financial distress.
- Students expressed concerns about what would happen when the rent amnesty ended. International students were recognised as much more vulnerable in absence of a safety net <sup>22</sup>

### SHARED LIVING

- Many students who lost supplementary income were forced into shared housing to reduce their living costs. In many instances this has resulted in multiple moves and overcrowding, with consequences for privacy, capacity to study online, and household dynamics.
- Capacity to study effectively online was compromised by shared living, particularly in instances where students may share bedrooms, or even occupy common living areas. Lack of private spaces made it difficult to engage in lectures, ask questions, connect with other students.
- Shared living also posed new health risks at a time when physical distancing needs to be practiced, particularly in circumstances where a household member may need to self-isolate because of Covid-19 testing or contact with someone diagnosed with Covid-19.
- Minimal public health guidance around how to achieve physical distancing in shared households.
- Risks associated with higher density housing, with sharing of common facilities including lifts and laundries.
- Shared housing carried risks of exploitation; some students do not have the required documentation, casual subletting, which leaves some with few tenancy rights.
- Conflict, household dynamics can be particularly fraught in situations of lockdown and isolation. Overcrowding has contributed to conflicts arising between household members, and incidents of bullying and discrimination.
- Remote learning in a shared household is also seen as contributing to household tensions, particularly around use of the internet. Competing users can slow internet connections to the detriment of those who are studying. Unstable Wi-Fi connections can frustrate and exacerbate existing learning challenges for international students. This emerged as a problem during exam periods, where students sharing houses, and even rooms, may have exam commitments on the same day.
- Concerns were expressed over household bullying and intimidation, and fracturing relationships between household members that were difficult to escape during lockdown, and when students had few other options for a place to live. It was noted that many students did not necessarily know each other well when moving into shared housing.

<sup>22</sup> Deakin Student Legal Service, MiCare.

- Rising incidents of domestic violence and intimate partner violence in the wider community during Covid-19 isolation also had parallels in the lives of international students.
- Research by Melbourne University highlighted the challenges for Victorian shared housing during Covid-19 and the increased vulnerability of international students regarding housing stress, particularly as they are less likely to understand the Australian housing system and more likely to suffer from exploitative renting practices.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Current responses:**

- Where shared housing was particularly problematic with competing internet requirements or access to confidential spaces, universities made it possible for students to come on campus to take exams, for example. Regular contact with each individual student allowed for action to be taken where this was a problem, although it relied on the willingness of the student to disclose.

### **DISENGAGEMENT FROM COURSE OF STUDY**

- Universities expressed concerns over students who had disengaged from communication, and dropped out of study, as supports were not available to be provided them. In some instances, students who had no supports turned to the university to seek out help.
- It was often difficult for the universities to identify who was still engaged and who was not. Students who drop out face complications regarding their visa status, due to the need to maintain their study commitments. This may have been a more significant problem for international students studying at smaller private training institutions.
- Students who were struggling were encouraged to seek intermissions (defer) their studies or to adopt a lower course load. These actions have implications however, for length of time in Australia, visa extensions and course completion dates.

### **GAMING AND GAMBLING**

- concerns about increased online gaming among international students, who were now spending increased time online for study and life generally.
- Online gaming addictions increases risks for gambling, with the potential progression to problematic online gambling<sup>2425</sup>
- Gaming uses tactics to invite gamers to play (supposedly free in game costs).
- Students rarely disclose a link to gambling ('we only play Mah-jong with friends') but the risks were concerning for partners.
- Online gaming and gambling is strongly linked to poor mental health, providing opportunities for immersion beyond the real world at a time of psychological distress.

<sup>23</sup> Raynor, K & Panza, L. (2020). The Impact of COVID-19 on Victorian Share Housing. Hallmark Research Initiative for Affordable Housing (HRIAH), University of Melbourne, Parkville.

<sup>24</sup> EACH Gambler's Help

<sup>25</sup> Rockloff, M., Russell, AMT, Greer, N, Lole, L, Hing, N & Browne, M (2020). Loot Boxes: Are they grooming youth for gambling? Central Queensland University for the NSW Responsible Gambling Fund

- Gambling may not to be disclosed as a problem by international students, as with most problem gamblers in mainstream society. The risks for international students are significant, however, particularly in an environment where they have uncertain or diminishing income.
- Gambling platforms in Australia are considered to pose particular risks for international students by contrast with gambling in home countries, where it is often illegal and unregulated. Gambling is regulated and widely advertised in Australia and can led to students assuming they are better protected from losses when they are not.
- Gambling messages can also create the false perception that everyone wins.
- Australian research regarding international students and gambling has found that international students tended to gamble less than domestic students, but those who did gamble (mostly males) were twice as affected by harm. Lack of community education around gambling was a contributing factor<sup>26</sup>.
- Mental health issues. Underlying mental health issues are strongly linked to problem gambling: it is rarely the case that gambling harm is single issue, usually mental health issues or other financial difficulties which causes people to try their luck <sup>27</sup>
- EACH Gambler's Help counsellors were concerned about the issues facing international students currently because of their vulnerability.

#### **FINANCIAL SCAMS**

- Losing money to scams online, sending money overseas (Centre for Holistic Health).
- Scammers had been able to access personal details, from sites which students may have searched or purchased items. In some instances, supermarket staff had been alerted to the risks associated with scams and intervened to question students who were buying gift cards in volume to send to the scammers.
- While for some, the scams involved a few hundred dollars, one student was reported as losing \$35,000. Others had also lost substantial amounts (Centre for Holistic Health, Deakin University, DSLS, DUSA, EACH).
- Those who have been scammed experienced distress and lose trust in people.
- Money could not be retrieved in instances where money has already been transferred overseas (advice from VicPol to CHH).
- Partners report that scams were mainly targeting students from mainland China.

#### **VISA INSECURITY**

- Visa insecurity was another significant stressor, with students having to maintain their course attendance to meet stringent visa requirements under Subclass 500. This includes meeting course requirements; maintaining adequate health insurance; and maintaining adequate arrangements for education.

<sup>26</sup> Centre for Rural Health (2018). Occurrence and Correlates of Gambling Behaviour among International UTAS Students. Centre for Rural Health, University of Tasmania, Hobart.

<sup>27</sup> EACH Gambler's Help

- New graduates can apply for graduate working visas to remain living in Australia and gaining work experience in their chosen field. To qualify for this visa, students had to apply onshore under established rules. For students stranded offshore, this has added to their anxieties, about their inability to return to Australia to complete their studies.
- Students who had recently completed their courses but were unable to return home faced uncertainties with pending expiry of their visas.
- Applying for visa extensions incurs considerable cost; this was particularly problematic for students who have lost income from casual employment.
- Changes to student visa conditions announced in August 2020 addressed some but not all concerns about immigration status.
- Students who face expiration of their visas will be unlawfully in the country and face deportation, and exclusion from re-entering Australia in the future.
- Visa insecurity added distress and anxiety to students already dealing with significant life stressors (CHH, DSLS).

#### **PERSONAL DEBT**

- International students were borrowing from each other (MiCare). This carried risks for personal conflict when a student may not be able to repay a debt and creates unhealthy dependency relationships.
- Many international students have issues around debt due to borrowings to pay for their education in Australia. Inability to meet debt repayments may have consequences for family members in home countries.

#### **EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION**

- Employment discrimination and exploitation has long been recognised as serious issues for international students relying on casual employment to meet daily living needs.
- International students also face barriers in gaining employment and work experience placements as part of their course requirements and after graduation.
- Partners reported that employment issues were frequently raised often in social groups: international students found it hard to get employment and often face exploitation even from their own communities (Deakin Student Legal Service, MiCare).
- Students who are aware they are being exploited are often reluctant to complain or seek help, even when chronically unpaid. Working 'black' is still common, despite media reporting and actions taken by the Fair Work Commission.
- Students feared losing jobs and expressed concerns about whether they may face backlash from their own communities, that they may be ostracised, or shamed. Isolation adds to the complexities of reporting exploitation: students are here alone, without family support to act on their behalf (MiCare, DSLS).
- Students continue to be exploited as contractors: ABNs are required, but workers are essentially employees.
- Deakin Student Legal Service has advised students who are victims of wage theft to keep employment records as it is still possible to claim for underpayment of wages at a later time. Victoria passed legislation in 2020 imposing penalties for wage theft.



- Students are facing additional barriers to employment based on their visa status; the Federal Government's JobMaker scheme is open to those who have been receiving Commonwealth support, which excludes international students and other temporary migrants.
- International students have faced serious issues around workplace harassment and sexual assault. Their vulnerability to sexual exploitation is heightened by the urgency to have employment and an income.
- All of these issues have been exacerbated during the Covid -19 pandemic

### **RACISM**

- International students have reported increased incidents of racism during the pandemic.<sup>28</sup> This was extensively documented in a study by UTS and UNSW researchers for the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative.<sup>29</sup>
- Partners also reported concerns by students about racism and prejudice. Some students were reluctant to leave home because of their likely exposure to racist comments. Students from China and other Asian countries were particularly targeted.

## **International students and help seeking**

International students face structural and cultural barriers in accessing health and wellbeing services in mainstream settings. These have been highlighted by project partners:

### **BARRIERS TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING HELP SEEKING and SOME CURRENT RESPONSES**

#### **NO ACCESS TO MEDICARE**

- International students are required to maintain private insurance as a condition of the student visa. Students must sustain the Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) throughout their enrolment.
- Loss of employment and lack of income support has impacted on the ability of many international students to pay for their mandatory health insurance.
- Limited bulk billing options under the OSHC for students in community settings, with local GPs or other Medicare- funded services.
- This creates significant barriers to help seeking, particularly for mental health counselling and other supports. For example, students accessing mental health support through headspace GPs have to pay upfront for consultations and be refunded afterwards by their OSHC provider (headspace Hawthorn, EACH, Access Health & Community).

<sup>28</sup> Tian Yang, " We don't need China to tell us Australian racism exists – just ask international students", Guardian Australia, 15 June 2020

<sup>29</sup> Berg, L & Farbenblum, B (2020). *As If we aren't humans: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19*. Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, Sydney.

*"Yes, students have health insurance, but they have to pay upfront fees to their healthcare provider. If they don't have a job then how are they going to pay for the service."*

Australian Nepalese Dr Anupam Pokharel, advocating for a temporary extension of Medicare and other social security benefits to all international students in March.<sup>30</sup>

- The lack of access to Medicare for international students and other temporary migrants has wider health implications during a public health emergency. International students could access free testing for Covid-19 through community health services, such as EACH. However, prior to the rollout of the Victorian Government free testing stations, international students had to pay \$65 for pathology costs to get results. There was concern many could not afford to do this.
- Exclusion from Medicare denies international students' ready access to clinical psychological services at a time of great need (ABRISA).

#### **Current responses:**

- Universities have been working closely with preferred OSHC providers to better support international students during this pandemic (Deakin University collaboration on mental health with BUPA).
- Funding from the Victorian Government for mental health support for international students through Partners in Wellbeing program, Orygen and Study Melbourne- funded programs with community partners, IndianCare and Centre for Holistic Health.
- International students can access community health services for counselling and other supports. However, many students were unaware of these free services.

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

#### **Lack of awareness of services and eligibility for services:**

- This has been identified as a core issue for the partnership highlighting the need to strengthen referral pathways between mainstream services and university health and wellbeing services. International students often believe that local services are for citizens only. However, most Victorian Government-funded mental health and community health services have no visa limitations.
- Limited availability of dedicated ethno-specific services and health care professionals who speak community languages.

ABRISA points out there are limited options for mental health (psychological) counselling in language for Brazilian and Columbian students in Melbourne and for those that exist, lack of access to Medicare poses a barrier. Among partner organisations, the Centre for Holistic Health caters for Chinese speaking community members and international students. EACH has programs who speak community languages including Gambler's Help counsellors and Chinese

<sup>30</sup> Aryal, R, "Australia's Nepali community urges PM Scott Morrison to 'give a fair go to international students' amid coronavirus", SBS Nepali, 30 March 2020.

Peer Support, while headspace Hawthorn and Access HC have GPs who speak Mandarin and other languages.

### Health literacy

- Levels of understanding of health information are variable among international students. Messaging needs to be **meaningful in first languages (not simply a translation from English versions)**.
- Understanding the complexities and risks of transmission associated with the **coronavirus has been complicated by lack of readily accessible, credible information in first languages**. Students may not be accessing local information on COVID-19 and the Victorian Government response expectations. There are also concerns about the integrity of sources of information that are not evidence-based that students may access.

### Cultural perceptions of mental health:

- Cultural perceptions of mental health have long been recognised as barrier to help seeking<sup>31 32</sup> as has been demonstrated in a study of students from China.<sup>33</sup> The term, mental health, may have no equivalent in first languages. In some communities, it is conflated with madness and can be heavily stigmatised.
- Partners have discussed the importance of critically examining whether the descriptors used by agencies act as a barrier to help seeking rather than draw people in.
- Communication styles are culturally linked: for example, indirect language or substitutes are used to talk about health issues by Chin and Karen communities (MiCare)
- Cultural and gender issues have been identified in relation to willingness to seek help or discuss mental health concerns. Males are generally more reluctant to talk about their feelings. Generational differences have also been reported. (Centre for Holistic Health, ECLC, MiCare)
- Reaching out to support services can be a real taboo culturally (EACH Gambler's Help).

### Stigma and shame

- Stigma and shame are recognised barriers to accessing help for problem gambling or gaming (EACH Gambler's Help) and as mentioned above, stigma is also a barrier to help seeking for students experiencing psychological distress.
- Students also experience shame should they fail to meet parent, community, and their own expectations of performance in Australia.

### Telehealth and consultations online

- Telehealth offers opportunities for accessing help remotely, but potential barriers to engagement with health professionals have been noted (Access Health & Community).

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<sup>31</sup> Mewett-Forbes, H, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Kwan, B, "Mental health stigma biggest barrier for international students seeking help", SBS News, 14 January 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Xiao Yu Zhuang, Daniel Fu Keung Wong, Ting Kin Ng & Poon, A. (2020). "Effectiveness of Mental Health First Aid for Chinese-Speaking International Students in Melbourne", *Research on Social Work Practice* 2020, Vol. 30(3) pp.275-287.

- Students can be constrained by a lack of privacy and confidentiality in shared housing where the ability to disclose emotional or other issues in a safe space is limited owing to concerns around intrusions by other household members.
- This was also a problem for underage international students in shared housing or living with host families.
- Online sessions may limit the capacity to develop rapport with a counsellor or health professional based on trust.
- For some students, telehealth and online counselling was less confronting than face to face. For others, it was a less than satisfying experience.
- The positive benefits of Telehealth and online consultations are the accessibility of the platforms and the capacity to link with clients across geographical distances particularly with those who may have transport or logistical difficulties in attending a face-to-face consultation with the service or agency (Manningham Youth Services)

#### **PUBLIC TRANSPORT COSTS AND ISSUES**

- With international students experiencing ongoing financial insecurity, the issue of public transport travel costs has become more compelling (CISA).
- Changes introduced in 2015 allowed international students to purchase annual Myki passes with the 50 percent discount allowed for local students. However, international students cannot gain concessions on daily or weekly passes, or on Myki Money. Post graduate or part time international students are ineligible for concessions. This also applies to domestic students.
- Few international students have private transport, and the cost of travelling on public transport is a burden for many on limited incomes.
- Fines for travelling on public transport without a valid Myki card can heavily penalise international students who have lost their primary sources of income. Newly arrived students may inadvertently travel without a valid Myki card due to lack of knowledge about the fares system. Aggressive enforcement of public transport breaches by authorised officers can cause significant distress. The ability to seek a waiver of infringement penalties is limited.
- Students expressed concerns about safety of travel on public transport due to the risks of coronavirus.
- International students reported experiences of racism on public transport.

## PART 4 LEAVING NO-ONE OUT: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND INCLUSION FORUM

The Inner East Primary Care Partnership hosted a two-hour online forum on Wednesday 2 December 2020, presented as a webinar. The development of the forum structure, content and delivery was a collaborative effort, reflecting the input and priorities of partners and international students' lived experience. Several meetings were held across some months to plan the forum.

### Aims of the Forum

#### **Leaving No-One Out: International Students and Inclusion**

##### **Subtitle: Exploring the gap between hope and reality for international students**

- Highlighting the gap between hope and expectations, and the lived experiences of international students
- Identifying what works in promoting social inclusion for international students.

The forum aimed to focus on the life journey of international students and the gap between what they hope to experience in living and studying in Melbourne and the reality for many.

Covid-19 widened an existing gap. Moving towards recovery, the Partnership wanted to contribute to international students feeling welcomed, valued and included in the life of our Inner east and wider communities. The Forum Program aimed to identify guiding principles in promoting social inclusion for international students and showcase some great examples of inclusive activities and approaches by partners and stakeholders. See the IEPCP webpage for the flyer and program from the forum.

### *Structure of the Forum*

The forum was in two parts:

- the international student experience: providing a platform for the voices of international students to talk about their experiences of life as an international student in Melbourne, and impacts of Covid restrictions and policy responses;
- community-based initiatives: showcasing best practice to promote inclusion.

### *Target audience*

- international students
- local government
- community health services
- youth services
- migrant community organisations
- community service organisations
- interfaith groups
- education sector representatives
- state government representatives.

A total of 138 people joined the forum on the day. These included 47 people from 18 different higher educational institutions, 45 from 26 different community organisations, 13 international students, 10 people from five local councils, as well as representatives from local schools, Victorian

government departments, and student organisations. In addition, there were 28 different speakers and presenters at the forum.

## Presentations

### *Introduction and Setting the Scene*

- Tracey Blythe, Executive Officer, Inner East Primary Care Partnership
- Sarah Chong, Monash Community Strengthening Worker, MiCare
- Belle Lim, President, Council of International Students Australia (CISA)

### *International Student Experience*

#### **Panel Discussion with International Students** Moderated by Varsha Devi Balakrishnan

- Longovuka Akauola Misi, Deakin University
- Shuchang (Michael) Tian, Monash University
- Lestyorini (Rini), Swinburne University of Technology
- Souphaphone Thoommavongsa (Nang), Holmesglen Institute
- Sonela Raggoo, Holmesglen Institute
- Hasan Muttakin, Deakin University
- Shahnaaz Banu, Monash University

#### **Panel Discussion International Student Engagement /Advisers** Moderated by Sarah Chong

- Param Arputhanathan, Monash University
- Coby Liew, Deakin University
- Marie Quetel, Swinburne University of Technology
- Tracy A'Hearn, Holmesglen Institute

#### **Codesign With International Students:**

Associate Professor Helen Forbes-Mewett, Monash University with Varsha Devi Balakrishnan

### *Showcasing Good Practice Inclusion Initiatives in the Community*

#### **Overview:**

Emma Last, Partnerships and Engagement Coordinator, International Education, Study Melbourne

#### **Story Is Connection:**

Feifei Liao, Managing Director and Thu Nguyen, Marketing Strategist

#### **Chinese Peer Connection:**

Grace He, Project Community Education and Promotion Worker

#### **IndianCare:**

Dr Jyothsna Rao, International Student Welfare Program Coordinator (Project SSAS)

#### **St Tom's Hope and international students:**

Trami Truong, Community Outreach Worker, St Tom's Hope

Simon Wheelton, Director, Rotary Club of Box Hill Burwood

## Summing Up

Bwe Thay, Deputy Chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission

Mr Thay reflected on the **contribution that international students make to our multicultural communities**, beyond any economic benefit: as ambassadors, bringing different perspectives, volunteering, and taking back their education to benefit their homelands, our neighbours. They are an important part of our social fabric. He commented on the bravery of international students, in adapting to a new culture, studying and being away from home.

He emphasised the **importance of hearing student perspectives**; that it is fundamental to include student voices when designing inclusive community-based programs; we need to listen to their needs and hopes so that we can ensure that services are tailored and meaningful for students.

Bwe also mentioned that it was inspiring to see so many community groups and organisations stepping up to support international students during the pandemic - important that we continue to work together and to support each other so that no-one is left behind. We all need to build on this into the future.

## Key takeaways

*The Forum emphasised the importance of the following:*

- that international students who are invited to study here, feel valued, respected, included and having a sense of belonging to our communities
- working *with* international students; to enable their voices and perspectives
- co designing with students in planning, development, and implementation of community-based initiatives
- recognising the wide diversity of backgrounds, language, culture, religion, countries of origin among international students – as a need and an asset
- the value of agencies partnering with each other
- finding the entry points with the higher education sector: working with the international student engagement teams
- maintaining community-based support for international students, building on the gains through the pandemic by organisations stepping up to support international students.

IEPCP has recordings of each section of the forum, to ensure this event can act as a resource on the international student experience and best practice approaches. See <https://iepcp.org.au/key-project/international-students-and-social-inclusion/>



## PART 5 WHERE TO FROM HERE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

International students face multiple challenges as Victoria returns to more normality during 2021, and they seek to recover from the disruptions to their lives and life trajectories brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. As this report has shown, many students experienced considerable impact and emotional distress during 2020: in particular loss of income from casual employment, exacerbated by exclusion from federal income support that caused housing and food insecurity as well as loss of personal autonomy. These impacts were compounded by the long, hard lockdown in Melbourne, reinforcing their social isolation. There was a strong sense of rejection experienced by many international students as a result of the Prime Minister's comments that they should 'go home', they no longer felt that they belonged in Australia. (see in the media monitoring report and Part 2 of this report).

International students have been significantly impacted and some deeply traumatised by their experiences during the past year. At the same time, they have demonstrated their resilience and strength. It has been important to the students that they contribute and influence actions to promote their inclusion; and that government, agencies, and communities look for opportunities to work with them in the design and delivery of programs and activities.

These recommendations were captured for the consideration of the IE International Student Inclusion Partnership to help map out possible next steps:

### Progressing the partnership

1. Members of the partnership **build on the foundations established during 2020 by continuing to meet** (monthly or bi-monthly) as a partnership to provide updates on the status of international students, share information and resources and to work together to identify ways to better support international students and promote their inclusion in local communities, noting it is vital that partners continue to monitor the wellbeing of international students while the pandemic continues to impact on the community.
2. The **current composition of the partnership is reviewed**
  - to ensure that the voices of international students are included, as part of the partnership.
  - to ensure that other relevant stakeholders can contribute to information sharing and actions and activities (for example, Centre for Multicultural Youth, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health)
  - to identify new partners who have a role in supporting international students (for example, IndianCare and other ethno-specific service providers).

**Support from migrant specific community groups and migrant services** should be fostered by partners, encouraging continued support for international students, inclusion in community events and in opportunities for mentoring in employment and training.

**Note:** The pandemic has strengthened connections between migrant communities in Australia and students from home countries, in ways that perhaps did not exist previously. Similarly, support for international students from local interfaith and service groups has been vital during this time. Partners could consider ways in which these relationships can be maintained and strengthened over time, and for these community groups to be included in discussing any initiatives undertaken by the partnership.

3. Partners consider establishing or building **on small working groups** for the purposes of collaboration

- **international student engagement/advisory teams** at Box Hill Institute, Deakin University, Holmesglen, Monash, and Swinburne Universities strengthen connection, sharing of information, resource, and best practice initiatives, and explore opportunities for joint activities as relevant.
- **representatives of local councils**, Boroondara, Manningham, Monash, and Whitehorse, **continue to meet**, together with Study Melbourne, to consider possibilities for collaboration, including possibilities for region-based funding. This would build on the working group which met twice during 2020. Local councils have a key role to play in promoting inclusion of international students in community events and activities and in promoting access to council services (for example, maternal and child health and community playgroups).
- **youth services** from each local government area share practice and knowledge about working with young international students, including through School Focused Youth Services. This group could include headspace Hawthorn and EACH Gambler's Help counsellors and the Centre for Multicultural Youth could be partner to this. Youth services can also look for opportunities for activities and programs that bring together international students and domestic students. \*A working group could consider joint applications for grants, to allow for funding for more dedicated support for international students.
- **community health and community service organisations**, Access Health and Community, Carrington Health, EACH and Link/Latrobe Community Health, together with the Centre for Holistic Health, MiCare and other relevant agencies, could examine opportunities for strengthening relationships with higher education institutions, to **improve access to health and community services** for international students, or **to partner in health promotion and social inclusion activity**.

**Note:** This could involve the health and counselling teams at each of the higher education institutions, aimed at creating pathways for 'warm' referrals and information sharing, so that students do not have to repeat their stories or face other barriers to accessing the support they need. This is particularly important for referrals of psychological support. Holmesglen international student counselling team has proposed that a guide to local services guide be developed, with contacts at each agency. Note that headspace Hawthorn initiated some work on this during 2020. This could also involve health promotion practitioners contributing to health promoting initiatives on campus.

## Potential future actions

4. Partners recognise the ongoing challenges for international students in meeting daily needs in 2021, and the **importance of being able to access emergency relief, including income support** for those who need it. Partners to this project should continue to promote links to emergency relief providers, as part of the safety net for students living and/or studying in the east, and monitor pandemic recovery for this cohort, to ensure that students are gaining employment and financial security once more.
5. Non-higher education partners **attend/participate in the online forums** and webinars conducted by university partners and Study Melbourne. Active participation would strengthen the linkages between the higher education sector and the community services sector, for research and for collaboration.
6. Partners consider **hosting workshops on issues of mutual interest**. For example:
  - a workshop focussed on **secondary school aged international students**, involving the region's School Focused Youth Services, youth and community services and relevant state and private secondary schools. This would necessarily involve the Department of Education.
  - a workshop on **social and emotional wellbeing approaches**, including Partners for Wellbeing (EACH), Centre for Holistic Health, Orygen, Study Melbourne, CISA, headspace Hawthorn, community health services, EACH Gambler's Help, youth counselling services, community health counselling services, and other agencies, including IndianCare, Story IS Connection and ABRISA.
  - a workshop on **issues and challenges for international students attending private training institutions** in the eastern region, in partnership with Study Melbourne.
  - a workshop on the issues and challenges facing **international students with dependents**. This workshop could include maternal and child health services, Eastern Health, and other relevant agencies.
  - A workshop on **employment, volunteering and work placements** for international students, that identifies barriers and aims to create opportunities and support pathways for international students, with support from local services and communities.
7. Tertiary Education partners continue to promote opportunities for **stronger connections between international students and domestic students**. International students frequently express disappointment about a lack of connection to local students, and other young people in the community.
8. Partners consider ways of **strengthening inclusion with local communities** and **strengthening access to services** for all international students including older students and international students with dependents.

9. Partners explore and **assess the best way of promoting information** to international students about local services (health and wellbeing, libraries, neighbourhood houses etc) and community education, on issues, for example, gaming and gambling, alcohol and other drugs, relationship and sexual health issues. E.g. Information dissemination in student newsletters and bulletins and on Facebook groups, and on platforms like WeChat are being used. CISA and other representative student organisations, as well as international student advisers, are important partners to include in this process.

10. The partnership **undertakes a needs and gap analysis of current relationships between the higher education sector and the health and community services sector** to identify any gaps in service provision. Some higher education institutions have established relationships that other higher education institutions in the east may not have. This would help in targeting of services and organisations that can contribute to more integrated support for international students.

**Note:** This has become increasingly important given that the international student engagement teams at each university have been undergoing restructuring and the lower intake of international students due to border closures.

For example, Eastern Community Legal Services operates the Deakin Student Legal Service. A comparable service is being piloted at Swinburne University. Having ready access to legal services that have a strong working knowledge of the issues facing international students is important. This is also relevant to Holmesglen and Box Hill TAFE. There are other services, like CASA, that have relationships with some higher education institutions but not others.

11. Local councils (or another partner) consider developing or incorporating an **international student wellbeing hub in the catchment**, along the lines of the student hub that has been created by Whittlesea Council. This would allow for integrated responses to student needs, and inclusion initiatives, as well as extending support across local government operations, recognising that international students constitute an important population cohort in each municipality.

12. The partnership consider an **advocacy strategy** on issues of concern for students, including:

- continuing financial support from the Victorian Government for international students with little or no income support
- access to concessional travel for post-graduate international students
- advocacy for students on tenancy related concerns, and workplace exploitation (including wage theft).
- information for international students working in high-risk environments, for example, as food delivery riders.

**Note:** \*These initiatives might be led by CISA, Deakin University Students Association, Deakin Students Legal Service, and Swinburne University (safety for food delivery riders' initiative).

- International students are also overrepresented in statistics of people drowning at beaches and inland rivers; collaboration with organisations such as South East Community Links (SECAL) that run water safety programs could be considered.

## Guiding principles for working together

13. Principles of **partnership and codesign with international students** guide any planning and development of actions and initiatives adopted by partners to support student health and wellbeing, including when working with government departments, or working with the education sector, the community, and other organisations.
14. All agencies have a **cultural lens** in the promotion and provision of services to international students, to ensure **messaging is culturally relevant, meaningful in first languages** and is **welcoming and inclusive**. Understanding different cultural concepts of health is critical, particularly in the field of mental health, where there is frequently no equivalent in first languages (for example, no word for anxiety in Nepali, or mental health in Arabic or Chinese languages), and use of Western concepts of mental health can create barriers to help seeking (mental health being equated with madness, for example, and stigmatised).

International students come from diverse cultural, spiritual, and linguistic backgrounds, and there are expected to be varying levels of **health literacy** and will need to consider this in health messaging. Codesign will enhance relationships and prospects that programs will be successful. Agencies can also share learnings from good practice, such as Story IS Connection, Centre for Holistic Health, IndianCare and EACH Chinese Peer Connection.

There is a need to think about how we describe mental health in community languages. Can we use other ways of describing mental health, using emotions and feelings? There are limited words in Chinese languages to describe feelings (Centre for Holistic Health).

Options to break the barriers around how people from Chinese background talk about emotions and promote help seeking should be explored. Peer mentoring is one approach that has been suggested.