

# The pandemic and the welfare of international students

Abandonment or policy consistency?

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In its response to COVID-19 in 2020, the Australian Government excluded international students from the temporary financial assistance it offered most permanent residents. This article examines the status of international student welfare as a policy question before and during the pandemic, and discusses post-pandemic policy implications. It draws on pre- and during-COVID-19 survey data from international students in Sydney and Melbourne. We argue that the pandemic highlighted and exacerbated an existing policy absence, rather than constituting a fresh abandonment of international students. Since the Dawkins changes in the early 1990s, international students have been officially treated in policy as consumers, not as 'social citizens'. This made many of them vulnerable to socio-economic shocks, given widespread dependence on precarious employment and insecure private income sources. The central policy implication is that, to avoid disproportionate welfare diminutions in future crises, the government needs to align the treatment of international and domestic students.

*Keywords: COVID-19, international students, vulnerability*

## Introduction

At a press conference on 3 April 2020, Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, announced that international students would not be eligible to receive either of the new pandemic-related financial assistance payments, JobSeeker and JobKeeper. He justified this on the basis that international students 'have to give a warranty that they are able to support themselves for the first twelve months of their study'. The Prime Minister made clear that they are 'not held here compulsorily', and that 'there is the alternative for them to return to their home countries' (Gibson and Moran, 2020). The decision not to assist international students presented them with a harsh reality. For many, working part-time to earn a wage – as has always been allowed (Department of Home Affairs, 2020) – ceased to be an option. This was the situation as many businesses that employed students were shut down or they operated with reduced workforces during the pandemic-related lockdowns.

As a result of the Government's refusal to expand the coverage of social assistance at a vitally important time, international student precarity has increased further. How would these members of our community make ends meet when those of them who relied on part-time work, could not work, and were offered no effective means in a lockdown situation to earn wages to cover rent, food, and other essentials? The Government's decision to not compensate international students represented the abandonment of a category of people who, as the Foreign Minister recognised, supported an estimated 240,000 Australian jobs before the pandemic (Whiteford, 2020).

However, despite what appeared on the surface to be a fresh abandonment by the Federal Government, the Prime Minister's announcement did not constitute a substantive change in policy. What it did represent was a failure to acknowledge the need to compensate international students who lost their paid employment due to the pandemic. This had dramatic, knock-on welfare impacts, especially in relation to the capacity to make ends meet financially. It is important to note that, since the early 1990s, when the Hawke Labor Government opened the education system to internationalisation, international students have not been entitled to access rights to the Australian welfare state. They are 'non-citizens' when it comes to accessing many of the legal, political, and social rights of citizenship which prevail for permanent residents (Ramia, Marginson and Sawir, 2013). They have since been viewed by successive governments as temporary migrants.

This article presents fresh evidence on the welfare of international students before and during the pandemic, with a particular focus on the aftermath of the 50-day nation-wide lockdown from 13 March to 1 May 2020 (Walquist, 2020). The 2021 lockdowns are not considered. The implications

of our analysis for post-pandemic government policy are also discussed. Based on quantitative and qualitative data collected before and during the pandemic, including more than 7,000 valid survey responses and 45 student interviews, our central finding is that the abandonment of international students in 2020 represented a major exacerbation of already poor working and housing conditions for some students. These poor outcomes, however, were not the result of a lack of commitment in policy. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that outside of federal government policy, assistance from state and local governments, community organisations and host educational institutions, represented a stepping-up of available assistance. This assistance has included, for example, irregular payments to assist with food, rent, and other living costs (Morris *et al.*, 2020). On the basis of the data analysis, we argue that to avoid the diminutions in wellbeing that the COVID-19 crisis represents, the formal policy treatment of international students should align with that of domestic students.

The first section of the article briefly reviews the rights of international students in law and policy, analysing the central legal instruments and the scholarly literature that assists in understanding how government policy shapes student welfare. The second section outlines our data sources and methodology. The third section presents the data analysis, highlighting the changing welfare scenarios faced by international students before and during the pandemic. This section also delves into student perceptions of what needs to change to improve policy. The fourth and final section discusses the policy implications of our analysis for international student welfare in the post-pandemic era.

## International students – consumers or citizens?

Australia has been increasingly important in the arena of international education for the last two decades. It was placed equal second in the world, along with the UK (the US is first), in terms of the absolute number of enrolled international students (OECD, 2020). Australia has a marketised system of higher education, which charges international students full fees, but offers them largely unsubsidised welfare and human services (Marginson *et al.*, 2010). Such a system was not inevitable. International students were accepted in significant numbers since the early post-War years as part of the Colombo Plan (Oakman, 2004). At that stage, the international education bargain between the government and international students was based mainly on providing 'aid' to developing countries through education. The basis began to shift from aid to 'trade' in the late 1980s, with the introduction of fee-based programs from 1992 (Adams *et al.*, 2011; Meadows, 2011). Since then, neo-liberalism, as seen in the prioritising

of economic goals over educational ones, has permeated policy by successive governments (Rea, 2016; Zajda, 2013). They have sought to strategically maximise fee revenues from international education, which is an important export, while regulating the education 'market' for quality assurance.

Despite high fees, access to welfare has been severely limited (Ramia, 2017; Roberts *et al.*, 2015). The rights that international students are entitled to are not the rights provided by the Australian welfare state. In law and policy, their rights are expressed mainly in terms of the responsibilities of educational institutions, on behalf of the federal government.

The central legal instruments are the *Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act*, 2000 (Australian Government, 2000) and the *National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Training to Overseas Students* (Australian Government, 2018). Together, the ESOS Act and National Code are generally referred to

by government and institutions as the 'ESOS Framework' (DESE, 2021). The ESOS Act specifies requirements which universities and non-university institutions must meet in order to be legally registered as providers. ESOS provisions compel institutions not to engage in 'misleading or deceptive conduct' (Pt 3, Div. 1, Sec. 15, or Pt 3.1.15) and require that they contribute to an Assurance Fund, and 'refund course money' in circumstances where courses 'do not commence on the agreed starting date' (Pt 3.2.27.3). The main point is that students are clearly afforded rights as consumers. The education services they consume are purchased on a commercial basis. In return for paying their fees, international students receive an education based on the provision of 'quality' programs, as listed under the 'Objects' of the Act (Pt 1.1.4A.b).

Though the exchange of services for fees is market-based, the National Code further specifies student rights. The Code supports the Act in two ways: first, by specifying preconditions for registration of providers; and second, by 'establish[ing] and safeguard[ing] Australia's reputation as a provider of high quality education and training'. It addresses quality and the reputation of Australia's education system indirectly by imposing 'nationally consistent standards for the conduct of registered providers and the registration of their courses', and by providing 'student welfare and support services' and 'nationally consistent standards for dealing with student complaints and appeals' (Pt A.3.1). International student welfare is thus manifestly constructed as a means to ensure Australia's international reputation through quality education.

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The international student rights provided through the ESOS Framework are mainly non-specific. They are mentioned under 'support services' (Standard 6 of the Code), which states that institutions 'must support the overseas student in adjusting to study and life in Australia by giving the overseas student information on or access to an age and culturally appropriate orientation program that provides information about' a range of services. The Code then repeats itself by specifying that information should relate to 'support services' (6.1.1), but also mentions: 'English language and study assistance programs'; 'legal services'; 'the

registered provider's facilities and resources'; 'student complaints and appeals processes'; 'requirements for course attendance and progress'; any factors 'adversely affecting' individual students' education; and 'employment rights and conditions' for students who are casually or part-time employed. In addition, institutions must

have 'critical incident policies' in place for all students (Standard 6.8-6.9). At no point in ESOS regulations is there specific detail regarding institutions' or the government's substantive responsibilities for the material living conditions of international students.

More is specified, however, on the accommodation and living arrangements for students under 18 years of age (Standard 5.3), with 'support and general welfare arrangements' being mentioned but left largely undefined. However, for students who are 18 and over, the requirements of providers are negligible, prescribing mainly that institutions must provide information on 'accommodation options and indicative costs of living in Australia' (2.1.11). There are provisions also on student appeals against academic and other decisions (Standard 8). Students have access to internal institutional complaints systems, and external processes through either the Overseas Student Ombudsman at the federal level for vocational colleges and private universities, and the relevant State Ombudsman for public institutions (Kamvounias, 2015; Stuhmcke *et al.*, 2015).

The legislation embeds a lack of equivalence between the rights of domestic and international students to welfare. International students are essentially treated as non-citizens (Robertson, 2015). They are required, for example, to pay for the full cost of their tuition; by contrast, domestic students, who are subject to varying degrees of subsidy, have the option to defer fee payment until they earn a specified minimum income. International students must 'purchase' health care rights which are broadly equivalent to those

of Medicare, the nominally free public health insurance system accessible to domestic students (Marginson *et al.*, 2010). In New South Wales and Victoria – the states where the majority of international students reside – international students access only limited and non-equivalent concessions on public transport; and those were only gained over the last decade (Patty, 2012; See-Tho, 2021). International students predominantly depend on the private rental market for their accommodation, with no possibility of subsidised housing or assistance from the government (Morris *et al.*, 2020). They do not qualify for any form of government-provided income assistance, though domestic students may qualify, if they pass stringent income and assets tests, for housing and income assistance through the social security system.

In these ways, the package of rights offered international students falls considerably short of 'social citizenship', which was first defined by T.H. Marshall (1950 [1963], p. 30) to approximate the welfare state. Marshall emphasised 'the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society'. The pandemic dramatically exposed this non-citizen status of international students. Research on their welfare before the pandemic had already drawn attention to the wide range of challenges they face (Ramia *et al.*, 2013; Marginson *et al.*, 2010). Studies had highlighted a range of problems, including: housing (Obeng-Odoom, 2012); social isolation, loneliness, civic engagement and domestic-international student interaction (Sawir *et al.*, 2008); personal safety risks due to crime (Nyland *et al.*, 2009); racism (Fincher & Shaw, 2011); personal finances (Forbes-Mewett *et al.*, 2009); and exploitation and underpayment in employment (Clibborn, 2021). Given the largely non-binding responsibilities of government and educational institutions to international student welfare, the Prime Minister's April 2020 announcement of non-support was simply a continuation of the present policy approach, with its known weaknesses; and not a departure from it.

## Methodology

The data for this study was collected as part of an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP190101073) on housing precarity among international students. It follows a convergent mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014). The student cohorts included those enrolled in all three post-secondary sectors (universities, vocational education and training (VET) and English language colleges), who were also living in the private rental sector in Sydney or Melbourne. The study incorporated an online survey conducted during the second half of 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic (Survey 1), and a follow-up survey fielded in June 2020, during the

pandemic (Survey 2). It further included 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with international students.

Survey 1 closed in early December 2019. A total of 43 educational institutions (ten universities, 24 VET providers, seven English language colleges, and two foundation course programs) assisted in the recruitment of participants, and 7,084 valid responses were obtained. Institutions sent a link to the survey to all their enrolled international students, thereby giving each student an equal opportunity to respond. Survey 2, a rapid follow-up survey, was fielded in June 2020 to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on employment, income and housing. Due to the constraints of ethical commitments to our respondents, we were only able to invite the 3,114 students who had consented to be re-contacted and provided an email address. It was not possible to link data between the two surveys at the individual level. Both surveys were available in English and Chinese. The data was analysed using a combination of univariate and bivariate descriptive statistical approaches using SPSSv.26 software.

Importantly, the survey data helped to provide further context for the in-depth interview data. The 45 student interviewees were recruited from a shortlist of Survey 1 respondents who consented to be contacted for interview. Due to the pandemic, the in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom during the middle and later months of 2020. An initial shortlist of 120 contacts was developed from the surveys, based on a composite 'precarity' score and composite 'social connection' score, as well as key demographic characteristics. These specifications allowed for purposeful selection across important areas without targeting individuals. The contact list was later augmented to include students sharing a bedroom with one or more others, as recruitment became focused on filling gaps in the emerging data. Of the 45 interviewees, 31 were university students, 10 were VET students, and 4 were English language students; 28 students were located in Sydney, and 17 were in Melbourne.

Interviewees were asked a wide range of questions designed to probe general housing circumstances, and how they perceived their accommodation. This included how they found their accommodation, whether they had other options, and why they decided to settle on where they live. It also included questions relating to tenant-landlord relations and the role of real-estate agents. A range of questions was asked as a means to critically unpack housing affordability. Students were also asked about the features and the main characteristics of their accommodation, the relationships they had with fellow tenants, the wider local community and the social networks that they maintained. Part-time employment and income was also a major theme in the questions.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A deductive coding frame of anticipated themes based on the five dimensions of housing precarity oriented initial coding.

Inductive codes were also generated from the detail of the interview data, allowing for the emergence of unanticipated themes. Deductive codes relevant to this article included 'capacity to afford rent', 'COVID change of circumstances', 'impact – health and wellbeing', 'impact – academic performance'. Inductive codes related to the topic included 'perception of government support', 'COVID concerns' and 'feelings about family support'. Codes were collaboratively reviewed across the research team and refined with each cycle of analysis. Interview transcripts were coded by a single researcher and reviewed by the project lead. Coding queries were used to explore capacity to afford rent, as well as impacts that did and did not overlap with a COVID-related change of circumstance.

## Results and analysis

In presenting findings organised by major themes, our objective was to highlight how the federal Government's policy non-response had dramatic consequences for the welfare for students. An additional objective was to elicit interviewees' views on what would need to change if their welfare was to be more effectively secured.

### *Pre-pandemic struggles: Working to try to make ends meet*

More than two in five of the international students surveyed before COVID-19 reported doing paid work, and 36 per cent listed paid employment as their main source of income. Of the 43 per cent engaged in paid work, 52 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that, if they lost their job, they would no longer be able to pay the rent and 58 per cent reported that they would have financial difficulties. Reliance on paid work was greatest for those earning less than \$500 a week. The interviews showed how access to employment and labour market circumstances impacted on the daily lives of students, particularly when settling in. Of the 45 students interviewed, 14 said it was harder than expected to find a job in Australia. Rahul, an Indian student in Melbourne, described the situation as he saw it:

As an international student it is very difficult here. Unless you know anyone in the industry who can get you a job, it is very difficult. It is like out of 100 international students, I think only five are lucky enough to get a job on their own.

Even when Rahul found a job, the casual contract made his hours and earnings unpredictable: 'So I think I suffered. I still have anxiety now and then when I don't get work because both of them [both jobs] are on [a] casual basis.' A number of students echoed the stress of looking for work and accepting poor employment conditions. Some spoke about the toll it took on their health and studies: 'It was the heaviest toll on

my studies. So apart from the mental conditions, I would have done a lot better than I've done in Uni if it wasn't for [working to pay] the rent' (Yashvin, Bangladeshi university student in Sydney).

Signs of financial stress – measured using 8 indicators adapted from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) – were evident among participants in the pre-COVID-19 survey. The most common evidence of hardship was borrowing from friends and family (41 per cent of respondents). This is unsurprising, given that 69 per cent of respondents received support from family as a main source of income. It should be of major concern, however, that one in five students (21 per cent) reported going without a meal over the last year. Six of the students we interviewed described missing out on food, transport or medical treatment in order to meet the cost of rent. Another six described the 'caution' and 'compromise' involved in living on the basics. Bhavna, an Indian university student, described going without basic necessities when she struggled to find work upon arriving in Sydney:

Definitely at that time we used to survive on one meal per day like just having one meal. Actually I have seen some days where having nothing at all wouldn't actually bother you much because it's just like you have this thing in your mind that you have to pay somebody back. You have to save up for your rent and your fees. I think that was the time when you have to put it all off. So we have seen the days where we wouldn't [be] eating all day and that actually [that] also affected me physically, not eating [for the] whole day and relying on one meal just and water.

Bhavna felt fortunate to have friends she could borrow money from in the weeks when she could not pay the rent: 'I would actually ask some of my friends if they would lend me and then I would return to them after'.

### *Worsening conditions under COVID-19*

For those international students reliant on paid work to cover living expenses, COVID-19 was profoundly disruptive. The absence of an effective emergency social safety net from government meant some students fell into immediate and severe hardship. The survey conducted during COVID-19 in 2020 established that around six in ten students who were previously employed and participated in the follow-up survey, had lost their jobs. Job losses were accompanied by a loss of income and a sharp increase in difficulties paying the rent. Almost half (45 per cent) of respondents reported an income below \$300 a week in the survey conducted during the pandemic, compared to 21 per cent of pre-pandemic survey respondents. Around one in six students reported no longer being able to pay their rent, and 42 per cent were struggling to pay the rent. More than half (54 per cent) agreed that they were experiencing financial difficulty. When the pandemic hit, Dev, an Indian student at a Melbourne university, went

from working four shifts per week, to one. He described the impact of the substantial decrease in income:

I have some savings so I was able to afford the rent ... but it did have an impact. Like you'd have to watch what you're spending, what you buy more consciously. Yeah, it had an impact because suddenly you go on a third of what you were earning before.

When asked if his parents were able to assist him during this time, he replied:

I don't think they have that much money to support me. If I do ask, my dad would be able to arrange money from somewhere, either borrow it or something. But he'd have to borrow and then there is a lot of interest when you borrow. So I haven't thought about it that way, but hopefully it doesn't come to that.

Other students interviewed were able to fall back on family support after losing their paid employment. Haymar, a university student in Sydney from Myanmar, lost her cafe job during the initial lockdown: 'I have no income but my parents can support me so I don't have much stress about the financial aspect'. However, for several others whose parents were already covering their tuition fees, asking for additional financial assistance from their family was a last resort: 'There's a curfew, like a whole curfew in Nepal. Nothing is open and yeah, because of that, I can't even ask help from my country ... Everyone has their own hardship so I can't really ask anything' (Meera, Sydney-based VET student).

The results of the post-COVID-19 survey suggest that the proportion of students enduring financial stress increased substantially during the pandemic. Direct comparison of the eight financial stress measures from the two surveys is not possible as the samples were not equivalent. In 2019, before the pandemic, ten per cent of students reported at least five items on the scale, compared to 18 per cent during the pandemic in 2020. While 44 per cent of respondents to the pre-COVID survey reported none of the hardship-related actions on the scale, among 2020 respondents this had dropped to 30 per cent. Close to half (47 per cent) of respondents approached their educational institution for assistance during the COVID-19 lockdown.

To stretch her limited budget, Lin, a Melbourne-based university student from Hong Kong, shared a bedroom with three others. She had expected to find work when she arrived in Melbourne, but the COVID-19 outbreak made it impossible:

So before I come here I kind of convinced my parents that I can find a job here to maintain my daily expenses, but unfortunately they need to send me some money to cover a bit. Yes, I need to cut [my] budget on entertaining or eating but that's good that [the university] gave me some subsidy... Just a cash

payment. Yes, when I send them my bank statement and the rental agreement and explain my hardship then they [the university] give me some support.

Duong, a Vietnamese student at a Sydney-based university, was accustomed to budgeting before the pandemic hit, so he felt that little had changed, at least in the early days of the lockdown, when we interviewed him:

Yeah well actually I'm like kind of budget[-oriented] and it's not just recently. I actually before the pandemic I already like tried to watch my budget, so yeah it doesn't change too much I think. I mean like maybe if I'm having [still had] my job, maybe I [would] buy a little more but for now at least it hasn't affected me too much. I'm just worried about the future ... Yeah, just like afraid of running out of money because if I run out of money, I don't know how to manage that.

Even if they perceived that they were managing relatively well at the time of the interview – as did most of the students we interviewed – many were stressed about the months ahead. Having no safety net left students not knowing how they might cope if the pandemic was to persist into the medium term.

### *International students abandoned in a pandemic*

As highlighted earlier, the Government's rationale for excluding international students from inclusion in a social safety net – either in an emergency or long-term – is premised on the assumption that they are self-supporting or will be supported by their spouse or family (Bauböck, 2006, p. 24). Prospective students must prove that they can cover living costs for their first 12 months, set at AUD\$21,041 as of October 2019 (Study Australia, 2021). In entering into this contract, students take their cue from government estimates of living costs, which have long been criticised as out of step with the real cost of living in Australia (Forbes-Mewett *et al.*, 2009). As Celia, a scholarship holder at a Sydney-based university, observed:

When the international students come they need to prove that they have other financial support. So at this point they present the scholarship documents and this was accepted so I assumed that this could mean that I can live with that but I think for Sydney and with Melbourne [being more expensive], that it [the estimated living costs] needs to be different.

While scholarship holders tended to fare better than others – particularly once COVID-19 hit – the gap between the accepted amount Celia could supposedly live on, and her reality, still caught her by surprise.

In addition, students must only demonstrate that they have the funds to cover the first 12 months of residence, with many counting on finding employment in Australia to pay off loans taken to meet these requirements or cover remaining expenses. As Rahul explained:

In terms of paying for your rent as an international student, if you have loads of money in India you can probably stay without even working here [in Australia]. But with people who don't have a strong background with huge bank balances they need to work here to stay afloat. So in my case, I didn't get work for the first few months but after that I got a casual [retail] job.

As the preceding analysis shows, international students reliant on paid employment to cover their living expenses have struggled in Australia, and they were hit hard by the pandemic. Le, a Vietnamese student at a Sydney-based university, felt it was not reasonable to expect students to be self-supporting during a pandemic. She suggested that the requirement to prove they are self-supporting had even deterred some students from accessing the piecemeal relief payments that were available:

And that create a lot of stress for international students even when ... the universities like, 'Hey, we have this sort of fund to support international students', but to get access to those funds you need to send your bank statement and things like that. And a lot of students are just like [asking], "What if they report [me] to immigration ...?"

The pandemic only accentuated the normal problems with visa requirements premised on the unrealistic assumption that students can be self-supporting across a number of years of study. In these instances, however, a failure to adapt social assistance policy, so that international students were covered, had much wider and potentially long-term implications for student welfare and Australia's reputation as a study destination.

Not surprisingly, students overwhelmingly perceived the Federal Government's handling of their welfare in the context of the pandemic, in negative terms. Only 13 per cent of respondents to Survey 2 rated government support as 'good' or 'excellent'. Most interviewees perceived that the Government abandoning them during the pandemic was unfair and unjust. As Yashvin, a Bangladeshi student at a Sydney university, put it:

I've seen and especially in this current pandemic the Australian Government had made it more clear that they don't really care about the students. I don't know why is that. It's pretty much heartbreaking considering the input of them [international students] in the Australian economy ... the education sector and the work they put in.

Other interviewees echoed Yashvin's view that the pandemic had confirmed the Government's already neglectful

approach to international student welfare: 'It is not even a mystery anymore. The Prime Minister is like, you know, "I don't care about international students"' (Meera, Sydney student from Nepal).

The contribution international students make to the Australian economy and tertiary sector was a recurring theme among interviewees. As Bhavna put it:

Yeah, like most of the students were [saying], 'Okay, if you want us to return just give us our fees back. Just give our taxes back because we have paid a lot... because we are not earning that much but we have been paying a lot of money.

Bhavna is echoing the argument that, if governments create market-based services, the clients of those services should expect at least the compensation rights that markets offer (Robertson, 2015, p. 946).

***What needs to change, according to international students***

We asked students about what reforms were needed to deal with the problems they reported. Some argued that there was a need for the government and education providers to take greater responsibility for protecting international student

welfare in Australia, beyond the on-campus context. For example, Penelope pointed to her education provider's inadequate preparation of students like herself for daily life in Australian cities: 'I think [my university] definitely was not communicating this [the

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***'I think [my university] definitely was not communicating this [the scholarship amount] very clearly before coming and what would be exactly the costs for living in Sydney.'***

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scholarship amount] very clearly before coming and what would be exactly the costs for living in Sydney'. Pratham felt similarly:

Yeah, when I arrived in Melbourne like we had orientation but they didn't teach us anything properly, like how the finances are supposed to work and everything [...] So they have to make better plans for us to go through it. Yeah, to make me feel comfortable.

He said he learned about how daily life operates in Australia from his roommates and from YouTube videos.

Lin was emphatic that her decision to come to Australia was worthwhile, especially on education quality grounds: 'Yes, I love the Australian curriculum'. But she would have liked to see more affordable accommodation options, particularly given that employment was difficult to secure:

I would say, my house experiences are not what I expected before I came. ... It would be great if the government can provide different types of housing for international students to

choose according to their financial situations. It can ensure our living environment is appropriate for study. It is challenging for us to find affordable places to stay after paying expensive tuition fee. Especially, in the current situation without a part-time [job] in restaurants or retails.

Lin viewed accommodation as integral to the student experience, not outside of it. Dev was also satisfied with the education he was receiving, but he felt Australia fell short in its treatment of international students:

So my main purpose was to come for study, good education which I think I'm able to do that. I'm pretty happy with my progress and the course and my grades so far and my first progression as well ... Yeah, but I only regret just one aspect which is that even if I would have to say other countries such as Canada, I would have got the same quality education. I could have got everything pretty much the same and then on the top of that you get government [support] ... The government is supporting international students in those countries like their own you know. They are paying them not just one-off payments as Victorian Government did just giving \$1,000 one off payment ... and then that [Canadian, for example] Government is giving you like the JobKeeper once every fortnight.

Many students like Dev, who were disappointed by the Federal Government's lack of support for international students during the pandemic, felt that the Australian education providers and the Federal Government needed to change the way they think about international students and their place in Australia. As Pratham insisted: 'He [Prime Minister Morrison] was like, "Go back". I'm like, you only need us when you want the money. Like we are not cash cows for you.'

## Conclusions and implications

As the first section of this article revealed, international student rights in Australia are mainly those of consumers, and more specifically, consumers of an education which is quality-assured for pedagogy but not for supportive services. The education services provided to students are also financially insured, in case the educational institution in which the student is enrolled cannot provide the promised course or program. However, there is no 'insurance' against the inability to work or to pay the bills. International students also have education rights equivalent to those of domestic students. Thus, they are able to appeal academic decisions internally within their institution and if that is not resolved to their satisfaction, they can appeal externally to a State or the Commonwealth Ombudsman, depending on which sector there are enrolled in. But that is the extent of the possible claims students can make, given that they are temporary residents with limited entitlements. While domestic students have access to income assistance if they qualify under income

and assets thresholds, international students are excluded. This was the case well before the pandemic, and dates back as far as the late 1980s when the higher education system was opened up to fee-paying international students. The liberalisation of the system was, and remains, on a full-fee basis, and access to all other services is on a commercial basis. The material welfare of international students has never been a concern meaningfully dealt with by policy-makers.

The main result of the pandemic has been to exacerbate an existing set of welfare deficits produced by this lack of policy. The ESOS Framework, which provides legislative and policy bases for international student welfare, is not equipped for, and was never designed for, the provision of welfare as most would conceive of that term. COVID-19 lockdowns and movement restrictions brought this deficit into sharp relief. Not being subjects of the welfare state, and thus not having the social rights offered to permanent residents and citizens, many international students suffered disproportionately during the lockdown. The surveys and in-depth interviews conducted as part of our ARC project have revealed the incidence and extent of poverty and hardship experienced by students. Many interviewees expressed an acute sense of abandonment by the Australian Government, given the decision not to provide assistance in a crisis that resulted in widespread loss of paid employment. Paying the rent and covering everyday expenses became a huge challenge. A sizeable proportion of students feared that they could become homeless, and cut back on meals in order to pay bills and rent. Some were able to keep working in paid employment through the lockdown, but with reduced hours. An already delicate financial situation for many was made more difficult.

The pre-existing paucity of social rights guaranteed that a welfare deficit would arise in a situation of crisis. The central implication for policy, if future crises are not to yield a similar result, is that legislation and policy should be reformed to render the social rights of international students equivalent to those of domestic students. This would entail an overhaul of the ESOS Framework, to write-in to legislation that international students have the same access to rights and services as domestic students. Broader public policy statements by governments would need to meaningfully recognise the contribution of international students to the life of the nation. Though international students are in most cases temporary migrants, approximately fifty per cent of them are interested in migrating to Australia (Robertson, 2013). In addition, they are subject to the taxation system when in paid employment and, like all residents, permanent and temporary, international students pay goods and services taxes as consumers. In our study, students often emphasised that they make an economic contribution to Australia through taxes and education fees. In doing so, respondents made claims to entitlement that expose the lack of reciprocity in the marketised and contractualised



relationship with the Australian Government – consequently, they ‘co-opt the rhetoric of consumption and exchange as grounds of their claims to rights’ (Robertson, 2015, p. 946). The Government’s consumerist policy approach entices students, perhaps unwittingly, to claim at least their rights as consumers and taxpayers. The contributions of international students before the pandemic, to the economy in general and to the workforce in particular, have been recognised (Whiteford, 2020); as has their input into culture and to university life in Australia (Davis, 2010). It is evident that international students should have similar rights to domestic students, and that the ESOS Framework needs to define international student welfare in more meaningful, substantive and enforceable terms. Small signs of improvement came in 2021 when emergency relief payments for lockdown-affected States were extended to a wider cohort of temporary visa holders including international students (Klapdor, 2021). Still, future research is needed to address longer-term welfare needs. This involves an evaluation and critical assessment of the economic and social effects of rights-equalisation in policy.

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