

## Media Release

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### **“As if we weren’t humans”:** Australia’s global reputation damaged as humanitarian despair of international students and temporary migrants deepens

17 September 2020

*Thousands of international students and temporary migrants sour on Australia as they experience exclusion and racism, and increasingly cannot pay for food and basic living needs.*

A nationwide survey of more than 6000 international students and other temporary migrants conducted in July 2020 has found 70% lost all or most of their work during the pandemic. Thousands have been left unable to pay for food and rent. These migrants make up 10% of the Australian workforce.

*As if we weren’t humans: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19* is the latest report from UNSW Law Associate Professor Bassina Farbenblum and UTS Law Associate Professor Laurie Berg; co-directors of the [Migrant Worker Justice Initiative](#).

The survey revealed more than half the respondents (57%) believe their financial stress will deepen by year’s end, with one in three international students forecasting their funds will run out by October. Thousands expressed anguish and anger over the federal government’s decision to exclude temporary migrants from JobKeeper and JobSeeker support.

Beyond their immediate humanitarian plight, hundreds linked their distress to the Prime Minister’s message that those unable to support themselves should “make [their] way home”. They expressed feelings of abandonment and worthlessness: “like we do not exist”, “they don’t see us. They can’t hear us”.

In addition, a quarter experienced verbal racist abuse and a quarter reported people avoiding them because of their appearance. More than half of Chinese respondents reported experiencing either or both of these.

“Over 1600 participants described being targeted with xenophobic slurs, treated as though they were infected with COVID because they looked Asian, or harassed for wearing a face mask”, says A/Prof Farbenblum.

“Many reported that because of their Asian appearance they were punched, hit, kicked, shoved, deliberately spat at or coughed on by passers-by in the street and on public transport.”

For example, one female Vietnamese student said: “People were saying some racist comments and pushed me, saying that I was the reason for COVID and I should go away.” Another Chinese student said: “I have been harassed by teenagers and throwing eggs on my way home from school”.

While previous studies have documented aspects of the financial hardship of temporary migrants, this is the first study that reveals the depth of social exclusion, racism and deeper emotional consequences of Australia’s policies, which have significantly impacted Australia’s global reputation.

Following their pandemic experience, three in five international students, graduates and working holiday makers are now less likely or much less likely to recommend Australia as a place to study or have a working holiday. This includes important education markets such as Chinese and Nepalese students (76% and 69% respectively were now less likely to recommend Australia).

“I feel [the] Australian government doesn't think of temporary visa holders as human beings but merely a money making machine,” said one female Indian international student. “It’s appalling to see the PM consoling the citizens saying that we are all in this together but at the same time telling migrants to go back home in a pandemic.”

Another international Master’s student observed, “It’s completely hypocritical that we’re important for tax purposes, and in the sense that we contribute billions of dollars to the economy as university fees, but are treated as some breed of untouchables”.

A/Prof Berg says that Australia will bear the diplomatic and economic consequences of these policies for decades to come:

“Many of those suffering in Australia now will return home to become leaders in business and politics, holding roles of social influence around the region. Their experiences during this period will not be quickly forgotten.”

The full report is available at <https://www.mwji.org/covidreport>.

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## ***“As if we weren’t humans”:* Australia’s global reputation damaged as humanitarian despair of international students and temporary migrants deepens – Background notes**

UTS Law’s A/Prof Laurie Berg and UNSW’s A/Prof Bassina Farbenblum co-direct the [Migrant Worker Justice Initiative](#). They have published previous research reports on wage theft and exploitation of international students and temporary migrant workers, available [here](#). These include:

[International Students and Wage Theft in Australia](#) (2020)

[Living Precariously: Understanding International Students’ Housing Experiences in Australia](#) (2019)

More than 6,100 temporary visa holders were surveyed as part of this report, including international students, working holiday makers, temporary graduate visa holders, temporary skill shortage visa holders, refugees and people seeking asylum.

The survey was conducted in late June and July 2020.

Key findings include:

### **Inability to meet basic needs. Since March:**

- Close to half of respondents (42%) had been afraid they’d be homeless
- One in seven international students (14%) were homeless for a period
- More than one in four respondents (28%) were unable to pay for meals or food for some period
- 18% of respondents could not afford heating or electricity
- 10% of respondents could not afford essential medicine and 15% could not afford to see a doctor

57% of respondents believed their financial situation will be worse or much worse in the second half of 2020

35% of international students said they’d run out of funds by October

### **Why temporary migrants did not leave Australia**

- 57% of participants did not leave Australia due to their substantial investment in studies, work and/or their future in Australia
- Participants did not “return home” due to flights being unaffordable (27%) or unavailable (20%), or the closure of home country/key transit countries’ borders and/or domestic travel restrictions (19%)

### **Loss of income/family support**

- 70% of respondents who were working lost their job (54%) or most of their hours/shifts (16%)
- 32% could not afford basic living needs because since COVID-19 their family could no longer send as much money due to the global economic downturn

### **Financial support by charities, education providers and state governments**

- A third of all respondents (33%) sought emergency support to meet their essential needs
- Charities and others provided food, modest one-off cash payments and other forms of emergency relief

- Education providers were the most common source of support. However this was limited to one-off payments, generally under \$1000. Most were to university students (26% received support); only one in ten private college students (11%) received support.
- State governments provided support to 4% of respondents (predominantly international students)
- Close to a third (29%) did not seek emergency support for fear it might affect their visa

## **Racism**

- Almost a quarter (23%) reported being targeted by racist verbal abuse
- More than half of Chinese respondents (52%) reported experiences of racism in the form of verbal abuse and/or people avoiding them because of their appearance –substantially higher than other nationalities
- Other East Asian and South East Asian nationals reported the next highest incidence of racism (more than 40%)

## **Exploitative work, among those who continued working during COVID**

- One in five (21%) reported a reduced hourly wage
- One in ten (11%) did unpaid work
- One in seven (13%) was forced to do new tasks they did not want to do or were uncomfortable with
- One in seven (15%) respondents performed work in return for food and housing rather than wages

## **Reputational damage to education and tourist markets**

- Since their experience during the pandemic, 59% of international students (including 76% of Chinese students and 69% of Nepalese students), graduates and working holiday makers were now less likely or much less likely to recommend Australia as a place to study or have a working holiday