

LIVING PRECARIOUSLY

*Understanding International Students'
Housing Experiences in Australia*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Laurie Berg and Bassina Farbenblum | December 2019



Authors

Laurie Berg is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney.

Bassina Farbenblum is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Law, UNSW Sydney. She is the founding director of UNSW Law's Human Rights Clinic.

Laurie and Bassina co-direct the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative (www.mwji.org), which engages in detailed empirical research in Australia and globally to catalyse improved enforcement of rights and just remedies for temporary migrants.

Executive Summary

Introduction

In recent years, stakeholders across the international education sector have become increasingly concerned about the mistreatment of international students in housing and at work. In 2018, UNSW Sydney and UTS established a sector-wide consortium to better understand the problems international students encounter, and empirically identify key interventions that would have the greatest impact.¹ Through StudyNSW's Partner Project Scheme, the consortium established *Information for Impact: Enabling education providers to address exploitation of international students in accommodation and at work*.

This report establishes a detailed evidence base on international students' housing decisions and experiences in Australia. A second report, to be published in early 2020, will provide findings on international students' experiences of underpayment and other problems at work. A third report, to be published in the first half of 2020, will present the survey findings on interventions that can effectively guide students' decision-making and address problems in housing and work. In doing so, the study provides education providers, government, education agents and legal/tenancy service providers with much needed data to identify the conditions for exploitative conduct that require immediate law and policy reforms. It also seeks to identify the conditions for effective empowerment of international students, including through services delivered by education providers, education agents and government.

Overview of the survey and participants

The Information for Impact survey was an online anonymous survey conducted by Laurie Berg (UTS), Bassina Farbenblum (UNSW) and independent consultant Sonja Duncan between 9 April and 30 May 2019. The survey was undertaken by 5,968 current international students in Australia. This report is based on survey responses from 2,440 of these, aged 17 and over who received survey questions on housing experiences in Australia (the other survey participants received questions about work). The overwhelming majority of respondents were reporting on recent experiences (78% arrived since 2017 with 57% having arrived within a year of the survey).

The overwhelming majority (86%) were 20 years or older with a median age of 23. Respondents were nationals of 103 countries, with a quarter from China, followed by 14% from India. They were students at universities (59%), vocational and English language colleges (30%) and university foundation courses (12%). Approximately two thirds were located in NSW, with 96% in major Australian cities. For the vast majority, their planned stay was not brief: 69% planned to stay for more than two years. Among respondents who had arrived at least three months before the survey, two thirds (65%) had worked in Australia.

Respondents' first accommodation in Australia

Respondents were asked a set of questions related to their 'first accommodation in Australia (not including somewhere you stayed temporarily on arrival)':

Share houses were by far the most common first accommodation

Well over a third (36%) of respondents first lived in a share house, by far the most common first accommodation.

¹ The consortium included the Fair Work Ombudsman, English Australia, Redfern Legal Centre, International Student Education Agent Association, ISANA NSW, and Council of International Students Australia, as well as project advisors, Australian Taxation Office and the Commonwealth Department of Education.

Share houses were most common among both men (37%) and women (35%), and for both students studying in private colleges (35%) and at university (39%) and regardless of students' intended length of stay. Share houses were the first accommodation for especially large proportions of students from Colombia (51%), Pakistan (50%), Nepal (48%), India (41%) and Bangladesh (40%). Almost half of students aged 26-29 first lived in a share house, with proportions decreasing among younger students. A greater proportion of students who had worked in Australia at the time of the survey lived in share houses (39%) compared with those who had not (31%).

Approximately one in five stayed with **friends and family** (18%), either as guests or in a commercial arrangement, including a greater proportion of respondents who had worked in Australia (22%) than those who had not (13%).

Homestays were the first accommodation of around one in ten respondents (11%), including a higher proportion of women (12%) than men (9%). This housing was far more common among students from China (23%) than other nationalities (7%) and more common among college students (14%) than university students (5%).

Around one in ten respondents (11%) stayed in **university housing on campus**. This included particularly large proportions of students from Hong Kong (36%), USA (39%), and Singapore (35%), and a greater proportion of women (13%) than men (9%). It was far more common among those planning to stay 3-6 months (27%) than other periods.

Seven percent of respondents stayed in **commercial student accommodation** (e.g. Urbanest, Iglu), including similar proportions of college and university students. The largest proportions of students whose first accommodation was in commercial student accommodation were from Singapore (22%), Hong Kong (18%), Indonesia (12%), Malaysia (11%) and USA (10%).

Around one in seven (14%) respondents signed a lease directly with an **owner or real estate agent** in a private rental in their first accommodation. A **boarding house** (renting a bed in a house with rules they were required to obey) was the first accommodation for 2% of respondents.

Problems in accommodation

Poor conditions and exploitative practices were substantially more common in share houses

Half of all respondents indicated that they had experienced one or more problems in their housing in Australia. These included a range of deceptive practices: accommodation was different to what was described; paying for accommodation that did not exist at all; landlord moved extra people into the accommodation without the student's consent; student was told that the accommodation was 'not ready' and they had to pay extra to stay elsewhere; and landlord failed to provide their correct contact details. It also included several financial and other exploitative practices (landlord required the student to pay a lot of money up front; landlord would not return some or all of the student's bond; landlord suddenly increased the rent in the middle of a rental period; and unfair eviction). Students also experienced poor living conditions (overcrowded accommodation; accommodation that was unsafe or not fit to live in; and landlord would not make repairs). Students reported experiences of intimidation, harassment or sexual harassment by a landlord or tenant.

Every one of these problems (except sexual harassment) was experienced by more international students living in a boarding house or share house for their first housing than any other type of housing.

Problems in share houses were entrenched and persistent, and were not confined to share houses organised from overseas or to students' first accommodation

Almost half of respondents whose first accommodation was in a share house arranged it after arrival (46%), including substantially greater proportions of some nationalities, e.g. Indian and Nepalese students. The prevalence of most problems, including deception and poor housing conditions, did not diminish among those who organised their accommodation after arrival.

Almost two-thirds of respondents (61%) moved housing during their time in Australia. Overall, the proportion of students who experienced each type of problem in their first accommodation was similar to the proportion who experienced the problem in any later accommodation. Though the survey did not record respondents' type of accommodation for later housing, most of these were likely share houses as students moved from initial more secure housing to a share house, and/or from one share house to another. The proportion of participants who indicated that they experienced each problem in a share house in their first accommodation is, therefore, likely the tip of the iceberg of problems experienced in share houses overall.

Problems were most commonly experienced among respondents who organised their share house through social media or a peer-to-peer sharing website

Among those whose first accommodation was in a share house, over half organised it through a peer-to-peer sharing website (such as Gumtree, Flatmates.com.au or the Chinese language website/app, *Sydney Today*) (28%) or social media (including Facebook and WeChat) (23%). Among those who used these platforms to organise a share house, around half did so from their home country and half used the platforms in Australia. Deception, overcharging money upfront and poor living conditions were far more common among those who used these channels to organise their share house. This was the case regardless of whether they organised their share house from their home country or in Australia.

Among respondents whose first accommodation was in a share house, 98% organised this alone without assistance from their university or college. The findings underscore the need for education providers to provide housing services that assist international students to find decent share houses and evaluate housing offered online, both offshore and onshore.

Problems in homestays and commercial student accommodation

Although the greatest number of international students who experienced problems were in share houses and boarding houses, some other types of housing also warrant attention and reform. For example, many problems were also experienced by a substantial proportion of international students in homestays, including overcrowding, accommodation that was unsafe or not fit to live in and intimidation or harassment. Those whose first accommodation was in commercial student accommodation reported a comparatively high incidence of paying for non-existent accommodation, unexpectedly finding their accommodation was 'not ready' and having to stay somewhere else (higher than for any other accommodation type) and accommodation that was overcrowded, unsafe or not fit to live in.

Problems were experienced similarly among university and college students, with some variations between nationality groups

Students at private colleges experienced problems in almost the same proportions as university students. Most problems were reported by similar proportions of men and women.

However, there were greater disparities among different nationalities. Paying for accommodation that did not exist was reported by an especially large proportion of respondents from Nepal (20%), Vietnam (17%), Bangladesh (13%) and India (12%). Overcrowding was reported by particularly high proportions of students from China (21%), Brazil (18%), Vietnam (18%), India (16%) and Nepal (15%). Sexual harassment was experienced by respondents in almost all of the top 15 nationalities. Most problems were reported by similar proportions of those with self-reported good English language ability and those with fair or poor English.

Recommendations

The findings support many of the recommendations that appear in the recent UNSW Human Rights Clinic report, *No Place Like Home: Addressing Exploitation of International Students in Sydney's Housing Market*.² In particular, the findings confirm the need for increased access to quality affordable housing, including university housing and crisis accommodation. The data underscores the importance of improved access to information and substantially increased availability of services – both housing services that assist students to find decent share house accommodation and legal advice to empower students to enforce their rights. These services should be provided by universities, and by state and local governments for non-university students.

There is a clear need for increased government enforcement to break cycles of impunity and hold accountable the many accommodation providers who are repeatedly engaging in deceptive and exploitative practices in relation to international students. At the same time, the data indicates a pressing need to strengthen international students' legal rights and access to justice, particularly in share houses, boarding houses and elsewhere in the marginal rental sector. This includes, for example, extending the application of tenancy laws to all share house tenants and ensuring international students can easily reclaim their bond or other large sums of money improperly demanded by the housing provider upfront. Peer-to-peer sharing platforms like Gumtree and Flatmates.com.au must play a role in warning international students about potential dangers and removing deceptive advertisements.

Exploitative housing situations substantially undermine the international student experience in Australia. They impact international students' emotional, physical and financial wellbeing, and can seriously affect their studies. The pervasive nature of the problems identified in this report demands an investment of resources in timely and systemic responses by education providers, government and all stakeholders across the international education sector.

2 UNSW Human Rights Clinic, *No Place Like Home: Addressing Exploitation of International Students in Sydney's Housing Market* (2019).

