



UNSW  
SYDNEY

**Embargoed until 6.00am, Wednesday December 4, 2019**

## **Landmark study reveals international students commonly exploited by landlords in Australia**

The first in a series of reports from a landmark survey of more than 5,000 international students details a minefield of problems for those seeking accommodation in Australia.

Funded by StudyNSW as part of the *Information for Impact* project, the study is the work of UNSW Sydney's Bassina Farbenblum and UTS Law's Dr Laurie Berg and builds on their previous research into international student employment and wage theft.

Concerned about exploitative working and living conditions, the NSW government supported the study to better understand international students' needs and generate effective responses.

The first report - **Living Precariously: Understanding International Students' Housing Experiences in Australia** - reveals that for the largest proportion of international students (36%) share housing is their first home in Australia.

Students in share housing most frequently encountered illegal or poor living conditions (57% experienced these conditions in their first share house alone). These include:

- overcrowding,
- accommodation that is unsafe to live in,
- paying in advance for accommodation that does not exist,
- intimidation or harassment by a landlord or another tenant,
- landlords moving extra people into the accommodation without the student's consent,
- sudden increases in rent in the middle of a rental period, and
- an unfair eviction.

Exploitation and poor housing were not restricted to students in English language or vocational colleges - most problems were experienced by similar proportions of university students.

UNSW Sydney's Bassina Farbenblum says they expected to find that students would be more vulnerable to scams and exploitation when they organised share housing online from their home country rather than in Australia:

"In fact, we found that deception and poor housing conditions were just as common for international students who organised their housing here. Exploitation is thriving unchecked in the wild west of the share house market, and international students can't avoid it simply by organising housing after they arrive in Australia."

Problems were most commonly experienced among respondents who organised their share house through social media (e.g. Facebook, WeChat) or a peer-to-peer sharing website (e.g. Gumtree, Flatmates.com.au).

UTS Law's Dr Laurie Berg says half of international students used one of these platforms to organise their share house and reported the highest rates of deception, overcharging, demands for money upfront and poor living conditions:

"We now know that it's the advertisements on peer-to-peer sharing platforms like Gumtree and Flatmates.com.au and social media that lure the most international students into exploitative housing situations. In fact, 11% of students who used Gumtree paid for accommodation that did not even exist. These sites must invest resources in protecting and empowering these vulnerable users."

The authors conclude that exploitative housing situations can impact international students' emotional, physical and financial wellbeing, and seriously affect their studies.

Farbenblum and Dr Berg argue that all involved with international students should play their part in ensuring the students have a positive experience:

"The findings of this study demand an investment of resources in timely and systemic responses. Education providers must provide services to empower and support international students. Governments must step up and direct enforcement efforts to hold rogue education providers accountable and break cycles of impunity."

The authors' report in 2020 will present further survey data on interventions that can empower international students to effectively avoid or address these problems.

**ENDS**

Report and background notes available [here](#)

### **Contacts**

Dr Laurie Berg mob 0433 525 745, email [laurie.berg@uts.edu.au](mailto:laurie.berg@uts.edu.au)

Bassina Farbenblum mob 0412 105 177, email [b.farbenblum@unsw.edu.au](mailto:b.farbenblum@unsw.edu.au)

UTS Law Media – Kerrie Douglass ph 9514 3250, mob 0491 054 129, email [kerrie.douglass@uts.edu.au](mailto:kerrie.douglass@uts.edu.au)

UNSW Media - Emi Berry mob 0413 803 873, email [e.berry@unsw.edu.au](mailto:e.berry@unsw.edu.au)