

AS IF WE WEREN'T HUMANS

*The abandonment of temporary migrants
in Australia during COVID-19*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

Overview

In order to contain the spread of COVID-19, in March 2020 the Australian Government enforced nationwide lockdown policies to enforce social distancing and restrict the movement of all non-essential workers. As public-facing businesses closed their doors to customers, many temporary visa holders lost their jobs in heavily casualised industries such as hospitality and retail. Australia is home to over 1 million temporary visa holders, most of whom have work rights. The widespread job loss had a devastating financial impact on these temporary migrants, including international students, backpackers, graduates, sponsored workers and refugees, among others. At the same time, many international students who were financially reliant on family found themselves with less or no support due to the financial impact of the pandemic in their home countries.

As a result, reports quickly emerged that very large numbers of international students and other temporary migrants could not meet their basic living needs such as food and rent.

Nevertheless, the Australian government excluded temporary migrants from the JobKeeper and JobSeeker support packages introduced in late March. This was at odds with responses of other countries such as the United Kingdom,¹ New Zealand,² Canada³ and Ireland⁴ which have all extended wage subsidies to temporary migrants. Instead, on 3 April, Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that, for international students and anyone else visiting Australia who cannot support themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic, “it is time to make [their] way home”.⁵ However, recent government data confirms that in mid-June, 80% of student visa holders were still in Australia.⁶

Limited efforts have been made by the government to assess the humanitarian impact of COVID-19 on the hundreds of thousands of temporary migrants who remain in Australia. In July 2020 we conducted a survey of over 6,100 temporary visa holders in order to provide a platform for temporary migrants to voice their experiences and establish current large-scale first-hand empirical data to inform government decision-making. Respondents included approximately 5,000 international students, as well as a further thousand temporary visa holders including Working Holiday Makers, Temporary Graduate visa holders, Temporary Skill Shortage (‘TSS’) visa holders, refugees and people seeking asylum. The survey was anonymous, online, and disseminated via social media, education providers, service providers and community networks.

Survey findings

Respondents have not left Australia because it was not possible, or they could not risk losing investment in studies and life in Australia

Participants were asked why they had not made “their way home”. Many faced substantial, and often insurmountable, practical barriers to returning to their home country:

- One in five (20%) reported that flights were unavailable;
- One in five (19%) could not return because their country’s borders were closed, or key transit countries’ borders were closed, or they could not reach their home town due to domestic travel restrictions in their home country;
- One in four (27%) reported that flights were unaffordable to them.

But for the majority, leaving Australia was not an option because of the great investment they had made in their studies (57%), work and/or their future in Australia -- at the encouragement of the Australian government and business and education sectors. With borders remaining closed, 50% of those who chose not to leave did so because they might not be able to return to Australia soon, or at all, and this was a risk they could not take.

Most temporary migrants suffered critical loss of income from loss of work and/or diminished family support

- 70% of those respondents who were working lost their job or most of their hours or shifts since 1 March (54% lost their job and a further 16% lost most hours/shifts). A further 13% of respondents lost some of their hours or shifts.
- Though many international students had been relying on families at home for support, 32% indicated that they were now unable to pay for essential needs because since COVID-19 their family could no longer send the same amount of money.

Many temporary migrants cannot meet basic living needs

The survey findings confirm the ongoing acute deprivation of basic needs caused by the financial impact of COVID-related restrictions among many temporary migrants.



Close to half of respondents (42%) indicated that at some point since 1 March they had been afraid they would be homeless.

One in seven international students (14%) had in fact been homeless for a period since 1 March (sleeping on campus, on a friend's couch, in a car or on the streets). Temporary migrants are not eligible for admission to most homeless shelters.



Well over a quarter of respondents (28%) had been unable to pay for meals or food for some period since 1 March (30% of international students).



18% of respondents could not pay for heating or electricity (18% of international students).



One in ten respondents (10%) were unable to pay for essential medicine and 15% could not pay to see a doctor (9% and 14% of international students).

Temporary migrants' financial crisis will substantially worsen in the second half of 2020

- Well over half of respondents (57%) believed that their financial situation will be somewhat or much worse in the second half of 2020 (58% of international students).
- Though many have been running down their savings, 35% of international students believed that they would run out of funds by October 2020 (among 4,069 who answered the question).
- Many international students also raised serious concerns about their impending inability to pay course fees resulting in discontinuation of studies.

Current sources of financial support are deeply inadequate to meet need

- Since the first lockdown in March, a third (33%) of all respondents indicated they had sought emergency support to meet their essential needs (37% of international students).
- Charities and others provided food, one-off cash payments and other forms of emergency relief, but education providers were the source of the overwhelming majority of support received.
- Education provider support was limited to one-off payments, mostly to university students, among whom a quarter (26%) received support. Only one in ten students (11%) at private colleges received support. The overwhelming majority of those who received support got a one-off payment of under \$1000.
- The Red Cross provided support to 2% of respondents. Two thirds of these were international students, among whom 68% received a one-off payment of \$500 or less.
- State governments provided support to 4% of respondents, almost all of whom were international students.

- Close to a third (29%) indicated they did not seek emergency support because they were worried it might affect their visa. Visa concerns were a more common barrier among college students (33%) than university students (27%), and even more common for graduates (38%). Surprisingly, visa concerns were also identified by considerable proportions of TSS visa holders (26%).

Temporary migrants' wellbeing has been compromised at home and at work

Abuse and violence at home increased during COVID-19

438 respondents (9%) indicated that they had experienced verbal abuse or harassment in their home since March, and 90 respondents indicated that they had experienced physical abuse or violence. For over 82%, this started or became worse during COVID-19.

Many temporary migrants are encountering exploitative work during COVID-19

One in seven (15%) respondents reported that since 1 March they had performed work in return for food and housing rather than wages. While this was predictably far more common among backpackers (29%), it was also reported by 14% of students, 12% of Temporary Graduate visa holders and 10% of TSS or 457 visa holders.

Respondents who were working on 1 March reported that while they held their job they experienced more exploitative conditions during COVID-19:

- 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 not comfortable with.

Experiences of racism were widespread during COVID-19

A substantial proportion of survey respondents indicated that they had experienced racism in Australia during the pandemic:

- Almost a quarter (23%) indicated that they had experienced racism in the form of verbal abuse. This included 25% of international students and 26% of graduates.
- A quarter (25%) indicated that they had experienced racism in the form of people avoiding them because of their appearance.
- More than half of Chinese respondents (52%) reported that since 1 March they had experienced racism in the form of verbal abuse and/or people avoiding them because of their appearance. More than a third (35%) of Chinese respondents had been verbally abused - a substantially higher proportion than other nationalities.
- Nationals of other East Asian and South East Asian countries reported the next highest incidence of racism since 1 March, with over 40% having experienced verbal abuse and/or people avoiding them because of their appearance.

In open responses, participants shared over 1,600 personal experiences of racist verbal harassment, physical abuse, or being shunned in public spaces, workplaces and housing. These included accounts of targeted derogatory and xenophobic slurs, being treated as though they were personally infected with COVID-19 by virtue of their foreign appearance, and being targets of harassment because they chose to wear a face mask as a public health precaution. In addition to these cases of verbal abuse, many respondents recounted alarming experiences of physical assaults, some of which were particularly serious, which included being punched, hit, kicked, shoved, and being deliberately spat at or coughed on by passers-by. Many respondents of a range of nationalities reported being regularly told to go home and "get out of Australia".

Reputational damage to higher education and tourism markets

The cumulative financial, physical and psychological impact of their experiences during the pandemic has clearly soured temporary migrants on Australia.

- Among international students, graduates and Working Holiday Makers, 59% indicated that following their experience during COVID-19, they were less likely or much less likely to recommend Australia as a place to study or have a working holiday.
- This included important international education markets such as Chinese students (of whom 76% were now less likely to recommend Australia for study) and Nepalese students (69% were less likely to recommend Australia).
- The longer international students had been in Australia the more likely they were to have soured on their impression of Australia following their experience during COVID-19. For example, among the 1,623 international students who arrived between 2015 and 2018, 62% were now less likely or much less likely to recommend Australia as a place to study.

Thousands of respondents provided open responses expressing a sense of abandonment connected to Australia's response to the pandemic. Hundreds of respondents tied a sense of long-lasting distress, anger and dehumanisation to the Prime Minister's instruction "to make your way home". The determination to exclude temporary migrants from government support packages contributed to feelings of abandonment, humiliation and worthlessness: "they don't see us. They can't hear us", "like we do not exist", "like I didn't matter". A large number of participants used stark, dehumanising language to describe this: "some aliens who don't belong here", "inanimate objects", "discarded, unimportant and expendable", "trash", "garbage", "dirt", "I don't belong here".

A very large number expressed a sense of injustice and being callously used only for their economic contribution to Australia after having invested substantially in the Australian economy and community through working, paying taxes and high student fees. Many respondents characterised Australia's lack of support for temporary migrants during the pandemic as "unAustralian", "selfish", "greedy", "money oriented" and "all about money", a "blatant money grab" or "solely a money-making scheme". A striking number used words such as "cash cows", "money-making plants", "I see myself as merely a money printing machine", "ATMs of the Australian government", "walking moneybags", "just money, otherwise we are not worth anything", and "hung dry for cash".

Many respondents expressed frustration that the Australian government wrongly assumed that international students did not need support, and/or that it was possible for temporary migrants to simply go home. Many others explained that the expectation that temporary migrants should pack up and leave seemed to ignore the enormous investments many had made in setting up a life in Australia. As one French Temporary Graduate visa holder put it: "Some of us have been here for years and consider Australia like our home now, quitting everything we have done and been through is just unimaginable".

Many respondents felt that these experiences of discrimination, exclusion and inequality during the pandemic changed the way they felt about Australia overall and made them less likely to recommend Australia to friends and family. Some described how the ideal image of Australia as a "multicultural nation" that is "built by immigrants" and "famous for welcoming internationals" was "not the promised land as they pictured anymore". They noted the hypocrisy in government messaging during COVID-19: "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". Some specifically noted the significance of perceived anti-immigrant sentiment coming from the Prime Minister. As a Bhutanese Masters student put it: "If a person at the highest position makes us feel unwelcome, you can imagine the feelings of most Aussie people towards international students. I am scared it will start xenophobia". Many contrasted Australia's approach with the approach taken in Canada, New Zealand and elsewhere.

Despite these many sobering accounts of frustration and hurt in response to their treatment by the federal government, some respondents nonetheless spoke gratefully about how ordinary Australians, their university, community and charity groups or their state/local government stepped in to provide emergency help.

Conclusion

United Nations experts have stated that “no one should be left behind in this global fight against the pandemic. Governments must adopt measures ensuring that every individual ... regardless of their migration status, is included”.⁷ The ongoing failure to provide essential support to temporary migrants breaches Australia’s international human rights obligations which require the Australian government to ensure every person within its jurisdiction has a safe and secure place to live, adequate food, and can meet their basic health and living needs. Advising temporary visa holders to go home does not diminish these obligations. Nor does it absolve Australia of its moral obligations to these members of the Australian community whom it encouraged to greatly invest in studying and working here.

Australia’s abandonment of international students is causing grave damage to its reputation in the international education market, as well as among Working Holiday Makers. Australia’s education sector will likely suffer the economic consequences of these policies for years or decades to come. Australia may also suffer longer term geopolitical harm as many of those suffering in Australia now will return home to become leaders in business and politics and hold other roles of social influence around the region and globally. Their experiences during this period will not be quickly forgotten as they look to other countries, such as the UK and Ireland, that recognised international students and other temporary migrants as valued members of their community and included them in national support measures such as unemployment payments, wage subsidies and housing support during this difficult time.⁸

The Australian government should heed the observations of one respondent that are emblematic of the sentiments expressed by thousands of survey participants in their open responses: “Australia showed its true colors when it came to international students. They call us friends but then abandon us in our time of need. I think Australia will struggle to attract international students after the disgraceful treatment and lack of compassion shown during COVID”.

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 - 4 ‘COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme’, *Citizens Information, Government of Ireland* (Web Page) <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment_and_redundancy/covid19_temporary_wage_subsidy_scheme.html#b1830>.
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 - 8 See ‘Guidance - Check which employees you can put on furlough to use the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme’, *GOV.UK* (Web Page) <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/check-which-employees-you-can-put-on-furlough-to-use-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>>; ‘COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme’, *Citizens Information, Government of Ireland* (Web Page) <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment_and_redundancy/covid19_temporary_wage_subsidy_scheme.html#b1830>.

