THE COMMUNITY SAFETY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MELBOURNE: A SCOPING STUDY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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BACKGROUND
The ‘Community Safety of International Students in Melbourne: a Scoping Study’ was designed and implemented by the Institute for Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives (ICEPA), a key research institute of Victoria University (VU). The need for the research arose from concern about the increasing incidence of violence against international students, particularly those of Indian background, and the polarised and often heated public debate about whether or not the violence was racially or opportunistically motivated.

This research was funded by VU and undertaken between June and November 2009 by a VU research team comprising Professor Hurriyet Babacan, Ms Joanne Pyke, Ms Alex Bhathal, Dr Gurjeet Gill, Associate Professor Michele Grossman and Associate Professor Santina Bertone. Our findings are informed by evidence gathered using four research methods including a media analysis and an on-line student survey of 1,013 students (515 international students and 498 domestic students). The three largest groups of international student respondents were from South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) (25%) followed by students from South East Asia (Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia) and the Pacific (12%) and North Asia (China, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Taiwan) (10%). Other methods included in-depth, and face-to-face interviews with 35 international students and in-depth interviews with 29 key stakeholders. Stakeholders included representatives of government, education and training associations, community service providers, the Consul Generals in Victoria of India and China, members of Victoria Police and student associations.

The aims of the research were:

- To investigate perceptions and experiences concerning the safety of international students enrolled in public and private education institutions in Melbourne
- To gauge the motivating factors in crime against international students, to understand its impacts and explore the extent to which crimes were primarily racist, opportunistic, or involved a combination of these factors
- To examine the policy responses of key stakeholders including educational institutions, both public and private; police; public transport authorities and other key government and non-government agencies
- To document ideas, strategies and responses that will improve international student safety in Melbourne
- To identify areas in which further research can contribute greater knowledge and policy directions for enhancing international student safety in the community

Because this was a scoping study, we do not claim to have arrived at definitive conclusions or that the research findings can be generalised beyond the time and place in which the research was conducted. Rather, the aim was to identify issues of strategic significance and to highlight future research, policy and planning priorities. At the same time, the research incorporates a thorough analysis of the views and opinions of substantial numbers of people, all with experience and an interest in ensuring the safety of international students in Australia generally, and in Melbourne in particular.

The research was limited by a number of factors. A key limitation arose from the timing of the project, with most data collection taking place during the mid-year break in July 2009, thus restricting access to the full population of students. Another important limitation was that the survey was not administered to a representative sample of the student population and the respondents to the in depth interviews were self-selected. Therefore the research findings cannot be extrapolated to the population as a whole. The research was also conducted at a time of high levels of media coverage of attacks on international students, which appeared to have informed the perceptions of safety of both students and stakeholders. For example, many open-ended comments were prefaced by references to the media, such as, ‘it would appear from the media that . . . ’, indicating the extent to which media coverage has influenced perceptions of safety and ideas about those who are at risk. A further limitation was that important contextual data about the ethnicity of the victims of crime and details about where international students live is either not publicly available or is not consistently collected. As such, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions about the extent to which international students generally, and Indian students in particular, are victims of violence compared with the Australian born population. This lack of data is identified as an important issue in itself and one identified priority is to address this gap in order to more effectively plan and implement strategies to tackle issues that impact on international student community safety.

Due to these limitations, we do not claim to have arrived at definitive conclusions or that the research findings can be generalised. Rather, the aim was to identify issues of strategic significance and to highlight future research, policy and planning priorities. At the same time, the research incorporates a thorough analysis of the views and opinions of substantial numbers of people, all with experience and an interest in ensuring the safety of international students.

Key findings – community safety issues

- The vast majority (82%) of students surveyed, both international and domestic, felt Melbourne overall was a safe place to live; believed they lived in a safe part of Melbourne (81%), felt safe at their workplace (93%) and, felt safe when attending college or university (92%).
- Differences did exist, however, between the two student groups. Fewer international students (78%) agreed Melbourne was a safe place to live than local students (86%) and were more likely to report that when safety is threatened, there is a racial, religious or cultural element to that threat (50% vs 17%).
- More than half of international students surveyed (57%) said they found Australia was less safe than they had expected.
- Fifty per cent (201 students out of 403) of international students who reported perceived threats to their safety believed these threats had a racial, religious or cultural dimension, compared with 17% of domestic students.
- Nearly half of all the international students surveyed (49%) believed international students were unsafe compared with 34% domestic students. The odds of international students having this belief were 1.8 times greater than those of domestic students.
• There is a discrepancy between the views of stakeholders and international students on the community safety of international students. The majority of stakeholders believed that most violence against international students was opportunistic rather than racist in motivation. In contrast, in the survey results and interviews with international students, while threats to safety were understood as having multiple causes, racism was the cause most commonly identified.

• The vast majority of students surveyed feel safe in their place of employment, with 95% of domestic and 90% of international students reporting feeling safe while at work. Compared with domestic students, however, international students were twice as likely to report feeling unsafe at work (10% international/5% domestic). This gap between international and domestic student responses continues in relation to experiencing verbal abuse (58% international/44% domestic), being physically attacked (11% international/7.5% domestic) and being robbed (10% international/5% domestic). These results expose some general issues about community safety for all students with domestic students reporting high levels of safety risk in many categories. At the same time, it appears that safety risks are significantly greater for international students.

Key findings - threats to safety

• A key theme expressed by all respondents was that issues relating to violence against international students are complex. This is due to the diversity of the international student body as each individual experiences different risk factors according to a range of factors including gender, religion, class, educational institution, age and English language skills. Nevertheless, interview and survey data indicates that violence motivated by racism is perceived by a significant proportion of international students as a pervasive element in the cocktail of factors that produce risks to their safety.

• Both international and domestic students and stakeholders said that the key threats to safety included a combination of four main environmental factors, including higher risk of violence at night, being on public transport or in public spaces, particular localities that are unsafe and the use of alcohol and drugs.

• International students are exposed to environmental safety risk factors to a greater extent than domestic students due to a number of social-economic factors including: insufficient affordable housing, with current housing often located in areas considered less safe, their need to work in casual and precarious employment, often at night; their relative lack of private transport options and the relative absence of family and social networks. All research respondents believe that socio-economic factors make a key contribution to the conditions of safety for international students.

• There was a widely held perception by student survey respondents that those whose appearance least resembles the white, Anglo-Celtic majority are at greater risk. International students were much more likely to identify racial appearance as a safety risk factor compared with domestic students (61% compared with 39%).

• A majority of Victoria Police interviewees felt the boundary lines between ‘opportunistic’ and ‘racist’ motives in a number of recent assaults against international students are not always as clear cut as current debate might suggest. Most police could think of particular incidents in which both opportunism and racism were combined. Some police officers felt that racism, while it might not always be a primary motivation for crimes against the person in relation to international students, was sometimes a clear secondary element used to further humiliate or weaken the resistance of victims during the course of a robbery or an assault.

• Perpetrators of violence are understood to be groups of young, less educated and alienated men. This view was common across all stakeholders and student respondents to this study.

Key findings – impacts of threats to safety

• Both domestic and international students say they have adjusted their behaviour in response to perceived risks. These behaviours include self-imposed limitations on travel and night-time activities. For example, 53% of international student survey respondents say they do not travel at night as a measure to protect their safety. The major theme of comments made by all students was in relation to implementing prevention strategies such as travelling in groups, letting people know where you are going and being vigilant about surrounding environments.

• Media analysis revealed that the polarisation of views about the reasons for the attacks on international students has reflected and compounded a divide in public opinion in Australia on issues of community safety and racism. Moreover, public statements minimising or appearing to deny the role of racism have heightened tensions as reflected in student protests and in international and local ethnic community media coverage expressing concern about the safety of international students in Australia.

• A number of international students interviewed and surveyed in this research reported being unsupported by bystanders when they were being attacked. Such reports reinforce the notion that Melbourne is an uncoating place. This is a response that arises when there are low levels of trust or belonging, both key elements of social life in safe communities.

• There is a gap between what some international students expect of the police and what police themselves understand their role to be. Some international students said they did not feel the police were helpful or effective enough, and some also felt that police were sometimes too quick to apply an ethnic or racial bias. However, some police are concerned that their efforts to support international student victims of violent crime are not always accepted or welcome, and they are also concerned that lack of familiarity by international students with Australia’s legal system may be contributing to frustrations with police and the justice system more generally when student safety is at risk.

• The findings also indicated that international student interviewees highlighted the concerns for their safety expressed by parents, family and friends overseas. Media coverage, particularly in India, but in other countries as well, has created awareness of the violence and contributed to concern about the safety of international students in Australia.
Implications of key findings

Overall, the findings from this research show that the threats to safety experienced by international students have individual, community and international repercussions. The findings also highlight the extent to which international student safety is linked to broader environmental risk factors and systemic problems with public transport, housing and employment conditions. Findings also highlight that racism or cross-cultural misunderstanding is one pervasive element in a mix of interrelated factors. The circumstances of international students are diverse, but in general, they are particularly exposed to these threats to safety, with the relative absence of local family support, limited understanding of, or access to services and relatively limited options in terms of transport, housing and employment. Minimisation or denial of the relationship between these systemic problems and racism can entrench rather than redress the vulnerability and marginalisation of international students. The general response has been to encourage international students to change their behaviour to stay safe. While most students and stakeholders, and many in the general community, would agree that each of us bears some responsibility in looking out for our own safety and minimising risks where possible, the evidence from this study suggests that there is considerable scope to minimise existing threats to the community safety of international students.

HOW CAN THIS RESEARCH BE USED TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY SAFETY FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

This study canvasses and acknowledges the many policy and program responses by all stakeholders in addressing international student safety over the period in which this research has been conducted. We also reiterate that this is a scoping study that does not claim to have definitive answers to the complex issues we have considered in this exploratory research. At the same time, this research has generated some important insights about international student safety and we identify priorities and actions that we believe are important in addressing the issue of risks to international student safety.

Name and address racism

Evidence from both the student survey and international student interviews show that a large proportion of international students identify that there is a racial, cultural or religious element to threats to safety. Furthermore, both students and stakeholders suggest that there is a need to name and identify racism in all of its manifestations. This means acknowledging that racism exists and is at least one element of safety concerns. We also argue that there is also an ethical imperative to do this given that international students have been encouraged by government and the education and training sector to come to study in Australia and that their contribution to the Australian economy, particularly in Victoria, is so significant. We suggest that the Federal and Victorian governments in particular, but also those authorities and organisations that contribute to the broader community safety landscape in Melbourne specifically and Australia more generally, need to position themselves as advocates for the elimination of racism. Acknowledging and acting on racism has a variety of meanings for different sectors. At a minimum, it means recognising that international students have particular needs and experiences that need to be acknowledged and addressed. The following section elaborates on how this applies to various sectors.

Education and training providers

The key implication of naming racism in the provision of education and training services is greater recognition that the needs of international students are different from domestic students. Two key priorities we identify for education and training institutions are that:

- As part of their planning processes, educational institutions can ensure comprehensive and regular monitoring and understanding of student characteristics, needs and experiences. This monitoring could include factors such as ethnicity, race and gender and the broader characteristics that impact on individual safety such as mode of travel and type of accommodation and employment. Findings would ideally inform continuous review and development of services, infrastructure and strategic planning to maximise student safety.

- Changes to the use of funding by education and training providers could be considered so that reinvestment of international student fees into support services for international students is a central component of institutional budgeting processes. Such reinvestment could be used in part to fund the monitoring of international student needs and experiences above, and in part to provide support in relation to housing, employment, transport and greater awareness of and support for enhancing community safety for all international students regardless of background or length of stay in Australia.

Victoria Police

- We acknowledge and support police recognition of the need for further research to improve and increase the evidence base to enable a greater understanding of offender patterns, profiles and motivations surrounding assaults and violent robberies targeting international students. This includes the capacity for improved data capture to produce more finely-grained information about offenders as well as victims. Such data would significantly enhance the capacity of the police to develop and share more precisely informed strategies for risk assessment and crime reduction and prevention, thereby contributing to enhanced community safety for international students.

- The proactive community policing measures implemented by Victoria Police also align with priorities we identify through this research. Such measures have already proved effective in enhancing good communication and consultation between the police and members of the community from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and can be continued and strengthened. These include: police-community consultations on safety and violence; working with education and service providers to enhance situational awareness about staying safe in public places; the cooperative development of strategies for auditing and addressing high risk and ‘hot spot’ places and behaviours that threaten safety in local areas; and, enhanced cross-cultural training for operational police.

- Further important strategy could be to consult with community leaders and associations from countries with the largest groups of international students, particularly India and China. Such consultation could inform research on how best to address barriers facing students when contacting or engaging with police as well as how to better support international students who are victims of crime.

- We also identify the need for well-articulated local and national strategies in consultation with community organisations and State and Federal governments to assess risks for international student safety, educate international students about how the police and justice systems operate in Australia, and how international students can access these systems and exercise their rights.
• The need for a complaints mechanism that is accessible by and specific to the needs of international students was identified. It is also important that the information about its processes is widely communicated to the international student population through a range of networks and providers.

• There is also potential to review current approaches to cross-cultural training for operational police to enhance their capacity to promote positive engagement with international students and to respond effectively to the needs and experiences of international student victims of violent assault and other threats to community safety and wellbeing.

Government Agencies

• The capacity for planning could be enhanced by an expanded evidence base about the community safety of international students. Building on the learnings from this research, a fruitful strategy would be the implementation of a national survey to further investigate the findings of the current study with a representative sample of students coupled with consultation with education providers and stakeholders in every state and territory. Such a study would be usefully augmented by the expansion of Australian Bureau of Statistics census data to include international students from their first year of residence in Australia.

• We suggest the need for the implementation of a national inquiry to review progress against recommendations of the 1991 National Inquiry into Racist Violence to more clearly identify the racist dimensions of threats to community safety, including the safety of international students, and to inform future responses to ensure this threat to community safety is eliminated.

• While there are many important policy and program developments underway in relation to improving international student safety, all stakeholders emphasise the importance that these efforts engage all stakeholders and that they be coordinated and rapid in implementation. This includes involvement across government sectors, community services, education providers and community representatives at both a state and national commonwealth level.

• Given the importance of public transport as a safety risk factor, it is suggested that there be investigation of the frequency and patterns of threats to community safety on and around public transport and in public spaces as part of a coordinated, whole of government response, based on the high levels of use of both public transport and public spaces by international students in particular.

• The review and enhancement of communication and information for students both pre and post arrival in Australia could address many issues identified through this research. It is proposed that a key emphasis could be on providing information that creates realistic expectations and understandings for international students about the opportunities and challenges of studying and living in Australian communities, particularly in major capital cities, with regard to community safety and support.

Other sectors

• This research identifies that the employment conditions of international students is one element that could be improved to enhance community safety. There is potential to investigate employment opportunities available for international students as well as risks of exploitation. While survey results showed that 90% of international students feel safe at work, this evidence also indicates that a proportion (10%) identify feeling unsafe at work. Detailed research is required to understand the extent to which international students are exposed to safety risks at work.

• Our research has raised the possibility that established ethnic communities could improve their support for international students. We suggest research be undertaken to investigate the potential for and strategies necessary for ethnic communities to play a greater role in the support of international students and the benefits and problems presented by this approach.

Conclusions

This research addressed four key questions about the safety of international students: the perceived causes of violence against international students, the actual experiences of international students regarding their safety, the impacts of violence, and, what can be done to ensure the safety of international students. Our research was informed by an understanding that these questions and their responses are framed by their social, historic and economic contexts and that the recent increase in violence against students is an outcome of broader social problems and conditions. At the same time, we acknowledge the situational nature of attacks against international students and the limitations in making definitive claims about singular causes of violence. Overall, the intention of this research is to make a contribution to better understanding and address the threats and risks to which international students are exposed. In doing so, we urge that future efforts to enhance international student safety efforts and responses are coordinated, collaborative and implemented across the government, community, education and industry sectors which all have a role to play in ensuring community safety.

An important objective of our research was to investigate the polarisation of views about the causes of violence against international students that has led to a simplified public debate that explains the crimes as an outcome either of racism or opportunism. Such polarisation has the effect of disguising the full complexity of any incident of violence where it is entirely possible that amongst other factors, both racism and opportunism can be present at the same time in particular incidents of violence and assault. Our central argument is that racism is often one element of violent crimes and is symptomatic of a broader social landscape that is shaped by racial and ethnic tensions within some sectors of the community. We support this argument by drawing on the evidence gathered through this research. We argue that to ignore the role of racism runs the risk of failing to identify a key dimension of community safety and that denial serves to entrench rather than address problems with racist dimensions.

In a globalised world, the movements and proximity of people from many diverse cultural backgrounds present continuing challenges of living and working with difference. The globally mobile are the workforce of the future. While Australia generally, and Victoria in particular, is a culturally diverse society, with successful models of multiculturalism, the attacks on international students indicate that we cannot be complacent. Addressing safety issues for international students is a matter of human rights that goes to the heart of the question of how we deal with and value difference and diversity in the fabric of our society.