International student-workers in Australia: a new vulnerable workforce

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In the period immediately preceding the 2007 Australian election, much attention was accorded to the impact of the nation’s labour laws on vulnerable employees. This debate centred on specific groups including women, youth, migrants and workers on individual employment contracts. International students, by contrast, were ignored in the debate. This omission reflects the fact that though three million students study outside their home country, this community has not previously made an appearance in the labour studies literature. In this paper, we address this omission by depicting the work experience of 200 international students studying in Australian higher education institutions. We argue that a much greater proportion of international students participate in the labour market than earlier research has indicated and that in many cases they are compelled to accept very poor conditions of employment. Furthermore, we suggest that as major sponsors of international student visas, universities should inform and protect students’ labour rights and that given the dire situation of many they must become a recognised part of the vulnerable-worker debate.

Keywords: international student-workers; vulnerable workforce; employment; policy stratification

Introduction

Over 519,000 international students were enrolled onshore in Australian education institutions at the end of 2008, an increase of 20\% over the previous year. These visitors tend to remain for one to four years and through this period have long had the right to be employed for 20 hours per week during semester and an unlimited number of hours at other times. In September 2007, these work-time stipulations were modified to permit international students to obtain up to 18 months work experience on completing their studies. The large and growing number of international students and the 2007 extension of the time they can remain and accept employment are of significance. This is not least because research by Forbes-Mewett et al. (in press) has revealed that many international students experience severe financial difficulties while studying in Australia with a significant proportion having a non-wage income less than half the Henderson Poverty Line. Despite their consequent vulnerability,
international student-workers have not been included in debates on vulnerable workers and this is true even of contributions that have explored the vulnerability of young workers (see, for example, Pocock and Masterman-Smith 2005; Cowling et al. 2006; Fenwick 2006; Mathews 2006; Mitchell, Juniper, and Myers 2006; Stewart 2006; Burgess, Henderson, and Strachan 2007; Hodgkinson and Markey 2007; McDonald et al. 2007). In this paper, we address the prevailing paucity of knowledge on international student-workers by drawing on interviews with 200 higher education students across nine Australian universities. We argue a much greater proportion of international students participate in the Australian labour market than earlier research has indicated and that in many cases they are compelled to accept very poor conditions of employment. Furthermore, we suggest that as major sponsors of international student visas, universities should inform and protect students’ labour rights and that given the dire situation of many international students they must become a recognised part of the vulnerable-worker debate. The paper begins by discussing the student-worker literature and how policy stratification of the employment support regime impacts on the labour market position of low-wage employees. We then clarify the proportion of international students employed, the nature of their employment experience, and comment on what might be done to reduce their vulnerability.

**International student-workers**

The literature that has discussed the experience of student-workers tends to focus on quantifying the proportion of students employed, number of hours they labour and the effect employment has on academic results and well-being (Curtis 2000; Curtis and Shani 2002; Manthei and Gilmore 2005; Tam and Morrison 2005; Riggert et al. 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer 2006; Bexley et al. 2007; Biddle 2007). Seven decades of investigative efforts have not produced a consensus of opinion concerning the effect on academic performance and long-term well-being of working for pay while studying full-time (Bradley 2006; Riggert et al. 2006). There is, however, general agreement that students can benefit financially and academically from part-time employment, but 15 hours per week is a critical point beyond which students’ studies and well-being are likely to suffer (Neill et al. 2004). That there is a dark side to working while studying has been highlighted by McDonald et al. (2007) in Australia and by the US Committee on the Health and Safety Implications of Child Labor (CHSICL and National Research Council of Medicine 1998). The former notes student-workers are vulnerable to employer exploitation because of their limited work skills, high unemployment and under-employment, and poor knowledge of their rights. The CHSICL, by contrast, stresses the fact that student-workers tend to have a high rate of work-related injuries and substance abuse and commonly experience inadequate sleep and exercise. The CHSICL was established to examine how employment impacts on the health of young workers and to provide recommendations on how these adverse consequences can be prevented. Though not discussing international student-workers *per se*, the Committee’s 1998 report can be drawn upon with a view to containing the vulnerability of this community.

If it is accepted that student-workers are susceptible to exploitation and injury, it is reasonable to assume international students are even more vulnerable given their relative deficiency of language skills, local kin support and cultural knowledge and in many cases inadequate non-wage income support. They are also likely to be more vulnerable because their bargaining capacity is not strengthened by the supports that
underpin the position of domestic workers. At the very least, these buttresses include social security benefits, the enforcement of legal minimum conditions of employment by state agencies, and a cultural awareness of what are deemed work rights and reasonable behaviour on the part of employers. When discussing the props that underpin workers’ bargaining capacity, Haley-Lock and Ford Shah (2007) note that often the workers in greatest need of these social, legal and cultural supports are least able to access them. In Australia, workers fitting this description include newly arrived migrants/refugees whose market position is not underpinned by a capacity to access social security benefits and newly employed and casual workers not protected by unfair dismissal laws. Though more vulnerable than their domestic peers, international student-workers similarly suffer from a relative deficiency of supports. They cannot, for example, access Austudy, Medicare, HECS, rental subsidies, and in some states subsidised public transport as can domestic students.

Whether international students are subjected to greater exploitation than domestic students, however, is not known as the few studies undertaken on their employment experience have seldom gone beyond clarifying their numbers and work hours. In Britain, the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) undertook a pioneering effort when in 2004 it surveyed students across 20 UK universities and elected to distinguish between domestic and international students. By so doing, UKCISA was able to report that just over 50% of international students undertake employment and that postgraduates are more likely to be employed than are undergraduates. A degree of differentiation was shown with 53% of non-EU international students being employed compared to 46% of EU-international students and 47% of domestics. Furthermore, it was reported that the proportion of international students enrolled in new universities is higher than in long-established institutions. While UKCISA’s (2004) report did not clarify the number of hours international students work for remuneration, a 2006 UKCISA study of further education students reported that the latter work more hours than domestic students:

International students currently in paid employment earn on average £112 pw before tax which is a little more than the £92 pw that UK students earn on average. Nearly half (46 per cent) of those international students in paid jobs are working 16 or more hours a week which is a little more than UK students (where 36 per cent do). (UKCISA 2006)

In comparison, Anderson et al. (2006) surveyed Eastern European student-workers studying in the UK and found a large proportion of international students work more hours than their visa permitted. Seventy-five per cent of those surveyed admitted they worked more than 20 hours per week in term time and a little over two-thirds acknowledged working more than 30 hours. Why these students were willing to admit they had been breaching the conditions of their visas is because they were surveyed shortly before their country of origin became a member state of the European Union. Given this was the case, these students were free to admit they had been working beyond the legal limit because as EU citizens they no longer had to fear retribution.

While the UKCISA and Oxford research suggests UK international students have a higher level of participation and work longer hours than domestic students, the reverse has been reported by most Australian researchers. On surveying first-year students at a range of universities in mid term, Krause et al. (2005) reported 23.3% of international students were employed and that on average working 11.62 hours per week (domestic student participation was 58.7% and time employed was 12.45 hours). Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson (2006), by contrast, found a 27.2% participation rate
by international students and a number of reported hours lower than is the norm for
domestic students. These results suggest international students studying in Australia
are less active in the labour market than both their domestic and UK counterparts.
However, this conclusion is moot for unlike UK researchers, who asked international
students if they have worked at any time while studying, Australian researchers asked
students if they were currently employed. If conducted during term time, the latter
approach clarifies which students work and study concurrently but this insight is
achieved at the cost of clarity on how many students work overall, because the ques-
tion does not capture students who work only outside of semester or who have worked
in the past but are not currently employed. That the timing and phrasing of questions
relating to workforce participation help explain the results attained by Krause et al.
and Rosenthal et al. is indicated by an Australian Education International (AEI 2007)
survey which asked international students if they had undertaken paid work at any
time through 2006. The survey found that 56% of international students had paid work
during that year compared with 86% of domestic students. The AEI survey also
revealed that 70% of international students undertook paid work during holiday period
compared with 92% of domestic students. The survey also showed that the majority
of both international and domestic students, who did not have a paid job during 2006,
did not try to get one (71% and 75%, respectively). Similar reasons were given for
both groups, including study load, unavailability of jobs and lack of work experience.
For international students, the need for a working visa also factored. The survey
indicated that 80% of the international students who worked did so for an average of
five hours a week or more – this compared to 85% of domestic students. In a similar
vein to previous research, the limited information gathered by AEI relating to the
number of hours students worked provides little understanding of the magnitude of
international student involvement in the labour market.

The results generated by AEI’s 2006 survey are similar to those produced by UK
researchers. Given this is the case, it is reasonable to suspect that were it possible to
replicate the context in which the research undertaken by Anderson et al. (2006) was
conducted, a similar outcome would be generated. This was certainly the conclusion
reached by McInnis and Hartley (2002) who surveyed 1563 domestic and interna-
tional students at Melbourne University and found that no international student was
unwilling to admit working more than 20 hours per week even when guaranteed
anonymity. McInnis and Hartley gained the distinct impression that this was because
international students fear possible repercussions should they confess to strangers they
are breaking the law:

Our consultations suggested that there is a strong financial imperative for some full
fee-paying overseas students to work their allowed 20 hours and sometimes more. …
Given the limits placed on the number of hours these students can work we suspect
that we did not reach many international students in this position or that, despite our
reassurances, they did not feel free to divulge the full extent of their paid work.
(2002, 76)

The visa limitations placed on the labour market freedoms of international students
provide them with reason for caution when discussing their workforce participation.
In line with the conclusion of McInnis and Hartley (2002), in the current study we
suspect some interviewees did not divulge the number of hours they undertook in paid
employment. Nonetheless, extended discussions in the interviews provided some
revealing information.
The interviews

Interviews were conducted because this form of data gathering has the capacity to generate depth of understanding, particularly through follow-up questions, and because separated issues can be connected and synthesised. Being less pre-emptive of the possible data and interpretations, interviews also allow new issues or slants on issues to be identified and issues not foreseen by the researcher to come onto the agenda. In short, interviews allow greater scope for deeper knowledge to be created than surveys permit, though at the price of some loss of representation.

Conducted in 2005, the interviews involved face-to-face semi-structured conversations with 200 international higher education students (101 females and 99 males). The students were drawn from nine universities representing the geographic, urban–rural and status diversity that characterises Australia’s higher education sector. The conversations were of 30–50 minutes duration and were taped and subsequently transcribed. Participants were allocated a number (e.g. P1, P2) for purposes of anonymity, and sex, age, country of origin and an indication of course studied are indicated when presenting contributions provided from specific participants. In addition to interview question responses that covered a range of areas including accommodation, networks, finances and paid work, the data revealed evidence relating to delicate issues not directly approached – such as the number of paid work hours students undertook. In relation to paid work, the key issues of participation, occupation, remuneration, discrimination and crowding are addressed in the following section of the paper, where it is determined if international student-workers are a segregated and vulnerable workforce. Furthermore, light is cast upon the character of the vulnerability of international students as a new Australian workforce.

Workforce participation

One-third of interviewees revealed paid employment was their main source of income, while 57% indicated they were employed at the time of interview. A further 13% indicated they had worked at some time while studying in Australia, meaning 70% worked at some stage. As the surveys were conducted during term time, this level of participation was much higher than revealed by all Australian survey data.

While not specifically asked, 37% of those employed offered information about the number of hours they worked. Similar numbers indicated they worked between 1–5, 6–10 and 11–15 hours per week (22.7%, 21.3% and 18.7%, respectively); while a third (33.3%) indicated they worked between 16 and 20 hours. These results need to be contextualised in light of McInnis and Hartley’s (2002) impression that international students were unwilling to admit to working more than the allowed 20 hours per week. From this perspective, it is reasonable to assume that some interviewees in the current study were not prepared to admit they worked more than 20 hours. Indeed, while it is understandable that only four acknowledged working more than the permitted 20 hours per week, it was somewhat surprising that these four had no qualms about giving specific details:

I’m working at two jobs. I work five days in a real estate company as office administrator but I work from 9 am to 1.30 pm and in the evening … in the Indian restaurant I work only on Thursdays and Fridays. That’s from 5 to 12 in the night. (P36 female, aged 25, India, media and communication)
Another student working an illegal number of hours presents a similar case:

I’m working as a tutor in the faculty … and I’m also working at the lab, at the help desk. These two jobs and a job in a Sydney café – I am working at a part-time job as a café barista – I basically make coffees. Making some good money there. You work three days and you make two to three hundred bucks, everything’s free, snacks, coffee, everything’s free! I work three days there, and two days here [at university]. (S96 male, aged 24, India, information technology)

The above example presents circumstances where the student is happy about earning ‘good money’ and enjoying fringe benefits. It is apparent he is working a number of hours equivalent to full-time employment, as was another who indicated he had suffered stress and depression from work commitments:

I had to work a lot, I mean in my first two years when I was studying I had to work a lot to support myself so staying like 30–40 hours of work, and I was also trying to achieve high marks in my studies. (P132 male, aged 27, India, music therapy)

This comment supports the findings of CHSICL and National Research Council of Medicine (1998) and Neill et al. (2004) who have drawn attention to the negative aspects of working long hours while studying. While these views were not representative of the majority of interview responses, they may have been more representative of the international student community than the data reveals. Regardless, the accounts are important because they highlight the fact that some students do work longer hours than permitted in order to attain financial security.

The evidence provided in the interviews demonstrates that international student-workers frequently need to undertake employment in occupations that rank low in terms of employment stratification. Interviewees did not always specify their type of employment and some named two or three industries/occupations. According to one interviewee, international students ‘do all weird kind of jobs to sort out their financial problems’ (P109 male, aged 30, India, dentistry). Table 1 presents the range of employment undertaken by 142 of the interviewees.

The proportion of international students working in the higher education sector shown in Table 1 reflects the disproportionate number of postgraduates who participated in the study. Allowing for this fact, it is apparent many interviewees (43%) work in low-status occupations.

Table 1. Number of students employed by industry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>No. in industry</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health/medical</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labouring</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Remuneration**

Low-status occupations offer low remuneration and for international students the rates actually paid are often illegal. Sixty-two students (31%) gave information revealing the hourly rate paid as presented in Table 2.

Of the students who reported their hourly rate, 58% earned between $7 and $15 per hour at a time when the legal minimum for a casual waiter was $16.08 an hour and the rate for a casual shop assistant was $17.97 per hour. Of these students, five were under the age of 21 and may therefore have been paid a junior wage. Nevertheless, the data reveals many interviewees were paid well below the legal minimum. The following accounts testify:

… it’s a waitressing job. You’re doing everything from cleaning the cutlery … we are paid shift wages. I am getting $60 per shift … like 5 pm ‘til 12 midnight. (P36 female, aged 25, India, media and communication)

Indicating that she is working a seven-hour shift in a restaurant for less than $8.60 per hour provides a clear example of illegal practice. Nonetheless, the following excerpt indicates that an even lower rate of pay is received for similar work in another restaurant:

It’s bad, just $7 an hour before they said they gave lunch and then they didn’t give me anything after I worked there, she said I gave you probation so I have lunch for a week for free and then they lied to me they said when I started to work properly – they didn’t give anything. (P175 female, aged 33, China, education)

Although the arrangement described above regarding the provision of lunch is somewhat confusing, it is clear the rate of pay is well below the legal minima. Interviewees commonly thought Chinese restaurants frequently employ international students and pay illegal wages – a view supported by the following:

… surprisingly that’s the case with lots of Asian employers. They usually pay you below standard especially in Chinatown as well; they usually pay you $7 or even $6. I think that is certainly too low. (P38 female, aged 20, Indonesia, commerce)

Another commented:

I worked for one of my friends to do some paperwork, I worked in Chinese restaurant … the pay is very low, like $9 per hour. I don’t want to work in the restaurant anymore. (P177 female, aged 27, China, education)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$ per hour</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7–10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41+</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While the latter’s rate of pay is higher than the previous example, it remains below the legal minimum. The contribution also brings to light the fact that students are often exploited by ‘friends’ or those from their own national community. One interviewee summed the majority view by saying simply:

Chinese restaurant give you very low pay. (P79 male, aged 19, China, commerce and economics)

Although seemingly more prevalent in Chinese restaurants, the interviews indicate illegal remuneration is widespread across low-status occupations. For instance:

I’m doing part-time work … cashier in a grocer shop. $8 [per hour]. (P32 female, aged 25, China, business and information technology)

While not all interviewees participating in the paid workforce were employed by members of their own cultural group, it did appear common. The practice was indicative of the role of ethnic networks in international student mobility and the dynamics of their employment in Australia. The cultural and employment relationship between student-worker and employer provides some understanding why very few interviewees indicated they would become assertive if they had problems in the workplace. However, the views of those that did must not be overlooked:

If I had a problem I think I would just go straight up to the boss and tell him what’s going on, and say I’m not happy with this, not happy with that. (P46 male, aged 21, Malaysia, commerce)

And another:

Like $9 … I wasn’t happy with the rate. I went back to the boss, I said I’m not happy with the salary, I think I deserve more and he was happy to increase it by $1. (P63 male, aged 27, Sri Lanka, technology)

These examples are in line with the views of Takeda (2005), an international student who worked as a waitress for the legal minimum. She described how her hours were reduced once her employer found it was possible to employ international students who would work for even less and observes that international students are willing to work for these illegal rates because they are restricted to a small range of occupations. As a result, large numbers of student job seekers are crowded into a limited market and subjected to exploitation. Interestingly, Takeda rejected the notion that her difficulties were a consequence of racism, insisting it was simply the operation of the market. Many interviewees shared her view with only a minority believing their difficulties were due to discrimination.

**Discrimination**

Most references to discrimination related to the inability to find decent work though a small number of students reported experiencing overt bigotry:

She was a bit racist (laughs). The boss. She was a particularly nasty old woman. … She often she’d make remarks sort of leading to the fact like, … you people, you don’t know how to clean up, or sweep the floor, this is how you sweep the floor and things like that.
Basically it just meant I’m not doing things her way but she makes generalisations that her way was the right way, culturally, but she’s not representative of her culture. She was a nasty piece of job. (P116 female, aged 26, Malaysia, medicine)

An example of racist behaviour was offered by another student who insisted he had been subjected to discrimination ‘plenty of times’:

Yeah, plenty of times it’s happened. I got the experience from my faculty itself because of one lady working in our department and she’s very discriminatory. When you go and talk to her, she really looks at your colour … (P96 male, aged 24, India, information technology)

The majority of interviewees, however, did not believe they had experienced discrimination in the labour market or workplace and often suggested other dimensions to explain unfriendliness:

In the working place some people are not so friendly you can’t really guarantee that everyone is as friendly as you are so I don’t think it’s discrimination just depending on the different personality. (P174 female, aged 28, China)

Clearly, individual characteristics play a role in perceptions of discrimination. But, this does not diminish the fact that discrimination exits. Fortunately, many students found their workplaces friendly and management and supervisory staff helpful and approachable. As a consequence, there was very little comment on discriminatory behaviour of customers or clients in workplace settings. Generally, paid employment was positively perceived and reports such as, ‘I can learn English there and the people are nice’ were common (P178 female, aged 30, Japan, interpreting). The fact that international students identified the workplace as an environment conducive to learning English suggests motives other than the need for income when undertaking paid employment. Students whose motive for working was primarily for the purposes of improving cultural and English language skills would not be trapped in the same exploitative conditions as those who were in financial need. Others who were ensnared commented on difficulties at work due to inadequate English language skills. The following example shows how difficulties associated with language can become discriminatory:

… the problem is because language. One time I work for an Indonesian shop and they all speak Indonesian I can’t understand anything they just communicate with me in English and sometimes like they make a joke of me so I don’t really like it. (P124 female, aged 21, Vietnam, commerce)

Clearly working in unsatisfactory circumstances, students such as the one quoted above rarely indicated they had left their employment. This was usually because international students often find it difficult to obtain employment, especially in their preferred field:

I was applying for a lot of part-time jobs and I don’t want to name the company. I had gone there and may be just because of my way of speaking – it was a sales job – … whatever they had asked me I had done very well, but I just don’t get any reply from them, but they had a second interview of two hours, but they did not reply to me … I have good sales experience back in India but they never took me. I don’t know why. (P36, female, aged 25, India, media and communication)
The student above indicates she doesn’t know why she didn’t get the job, however, like many others she suggests the reason may be related to her manner of speaking. While an English language deficit is clearly a great hindrance for international students seeking work, others attribute their difficulty to their appearance. For example:

people are not very willing to give me a job because of my appearance, because I can’t do most of the jobs, you know I can’t be an accountant, they don’t want me there, they don’t want me to be anywhere where I’m visible, and with other jobs I’m not too comfortable doing them. (P109 male, aged 30, India, dentistry)

The student has not specified what he thinks it is about his appearance that makes him not acceptable in a ‘visible’ occupation. Given he is a Sikh, his headgear may be what he thinks sets him aside from others when applying for work. Despite his difficulties, it is notable that he appears to insinuate that, unlike many other international students, he is not prepared to be segmented into a lower status job. His approach both supports and contrasts with the following perspective. It supports the notion that Indian students often do not gain employment in their preferred profession and suggests they recognise they have to be prepared to undertake lower status jobs:

It’s just like the labour kind of work and we Indians we don’t get any professional work. I have got another friend in my house, he is 33 years old and he has been working for 12 years I guess in India … He is so capable of doing so many things but all he can do now is clean dishes in restaurants or manage the till in 711. Things like wash cars or waiter. (P8 male, aged 23, India, MBA)

In a similar vein, the following two perceptions attribute the lack of success in obtaining employment to residential status. In the first instance, the student refers to experiencing hostility and prejudice in Australia:

Not directly, but I feel now, because I am hunting for jobs, I feel most of them don’t want to give jobs to those from other countries, especially when they hear our voice and they understand our accent are different, they know that we are from other countries, … they try to give excuse that we need people with PR only, or this is a full-time job, or they say something but they don’t give the job to us. I keep trying of course. (P65 female, aged 34, Sri Lanka, international business)

The perception that permanent residence (PR) in Australia is a determining element for obtaining employment is not uncommon, as illustrated by the following example:

… there is too much discrimination between the international and national students, or the Australian and non-Australian residents, especially for getting work … For example getting a job – if you apply may be they have an interview which you are doing the steps, but finally they decide to … give the work to a nominated person that they have from previous, and it’s very hard to accept, because in this … instance, you couldn’t do any legal action against them. (P37 male, aged 40, Iran, physiotherapy)

Apart from the perceived discrimination relating to residential status expressed by the student, it appears there is a paucity of awareness of workplace recruitment practices. Specifically, the perspective above is based on a lack on understanding that there is a legal requirement to advertise some jobs even when the incumbent is reapplying and likely to retain the position. Another interviewee believed that work tasks were assigned in accordance to residential status:
... sometimes they see you're a foreigner so they assign you to some hard job. They separate to different groups and maybe some easy job, good job for the local, but if you're a foreigner they give you a hard job. (P28 male, aged 25, China, information technology)

This example suggests employers unfairly assign tasks in relation to difficulty and residential status – meaning those without residential status are given the more difficult tasks without additional remuneration. This claim not only supports the notion of segmentation of international students in relation to different types of work, but it also raises the issue of segmentation within the workplace. Despite this unfortunate observation, the student wished to retain his job because he had a good relationship with other workers and an ‘okay’ relationship with the employer.

Even when students gain employment they often experience difficulties because they lack language and cultural capacities that are given amongst domestic students. This phenomenon is likely to exacerbate a downward spiral for international students who find they must accept work that is much lower in the student-worker strata than they expected. One student summed this up by commenting:

... the problem out here is the international students are not informed of everything. We are coming from different cultures and the work ethics from the countries we come from are very different. (P190 male, aged 25, Bangladesh, engineering telecommunication)

It was evident throughout the interviews that international students had not been informed of their labour rights and as the major sponsors of international student visas, universities were remiss in not fulfilling this role, and for not intervening in exploitative employment relationships.

Discrimination in the workplace was not only attributed to employers. As indicated by the following excerpt, international students were also subject to unpleasant circumstances because of those they dealt with in their employment. In the following example, a student was employed in a call centre where she did not have the required language skills and capacity to relate to difficult customers:

I have many problems. I don’t know how to handle the calls and everything ... when you get a very nasty customer and they’ve got difficulties ... (P154 female, aged 21, China, commerce)

Unable to gain employment in what they deem decent jobs, students occasionally expressed feelings of shame. The following student indicated she not only had to deal with circumstances that were not in accordance with her expectations, but also had to consider the shame expressed by her family:

Because I see a lot of Indian students coming and they’re working in some situations that they would have never imagined to work back in their country, but yes, whatever your work ... I would have never imagined working as a waitress in India. My parents would have never, never, allowed me in my entire life to work as a waitress ... [and] they have told me never to tell to other people of my family that I’m working as a waitress. (P36 female, aged 25, India, media and communication)

This perspective may attract little sympathy in some circles, but it does raise the need for prospective students to be given a realistic picture of the likely employment circumstances they will encounter when studying in a foreign country. Some students were more accepting and less shameful of the lowering of their employment status:
Main difference is back home I am an officer. I’m doing my job. There actually I’m a government officer there and I’m a magistrate there so I have a designation and have another status there, and here I’m a student without any money. It’s totally different. (P20 male, aged 33, Bangladesh, environment management)

This student appeared more accepting about shifting from a position of power and influence to being a student without money. The fact that he seems less surprised than others about his new status gives the impression his experience was in line with his expectations.

Conclusion
With over 500,000 international students enrolled onshore in Australian education institutions, the international education market has generated a new and rapidly growing vulnerable sector of the workforce in Australia. Australian governments have shown a willingness to ease immigration and labour laws in order to assist the growth of this industry. They have, however, been decidedly disinclined to regulate in ways that will reduce the disparity that exists in the respective social, legal and cultural props that underpin the bargaining capacity of domestic and international student-workers. Reducing this disparity is an essential measure if employers’ capacity to exploit the hundreds of thousands of internationals who come to Australia is to be contained. We hold that the existing lack of balance is unacceptable and that as the major sponsors of international student visas, Australian universities are remiss in not providing adequate information and protection relating to student labour rights. Given our interviews present evidence that international student-workers are highly vulnerable, we insist there is an urgent need to match the nation’s effort at building the international education industry with a comparable effort designed to protect the employment rights of international students who choose to work and study in Australia.

Our interviews have also revealed that the proportion of international students active in the labour market is much higher than previously estimated and that many are disadvantaged by the difficulties they experience in relation to language and cultural adjustment. It is shown that they are crowded into a narrower range of jobs than is available to their domestic peers, and they commonly offset their disadvantages by working for less than the legal minima. The evidence provided in the interviews demonstrated that international student-workers frequently need to undertake employment in occupations that rank low in terms of employment stratification. A discovery not expected was that few international students believe the difficulties they experience in the workplace are a product of racism or exploitation. Their perspective is at least partly explained by the fact that many employers who pay international students less than the legal rate are part of the ethnic network that assists the international mobility of these students, while at the same time providing an environment ripe for exploitation. Despite their vulnerability, international students have previously been excluded from the vulnerable-worker debate – this paper has introduced to the literature international students as workers with rights and expectations and insists they must become recognised as an accepted part of this debate.

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