



student voices

Domestic cohort
engagement with
international students
through COVID-19

A summary of research undertaken by Rob Lawrence,
Prospect Research and Marketing

IEAA

International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) is the leading peak body organisation for international education. We strive to empower professionals, engage institutions, and enhance Australia's reputation as a provider of world-class education. We provide advocacy, deliver high-quality professional learning, and drive new research to highlight emerging trends, inform strategy and policy, and enrich the sector's knowledge.

Education New Zealand

Education New Zealand Manapou ki te Ao is New Zealand's government agency responsible for taking New Zealand's education to the world for enduring economic, social and cultural benefits. With offices in New Zealand and 13 global locations, we work towards the Government's vision for international education by providing a range of targeted services such as marketing, promotion and overseas representation. To get ahead of the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID pandemic, ENZ is currently playing a key leadership role in the development of a flexible, diverse and resilient sector.

About the authors

Rob Lawrence

The research described here was undertaken by Rob Lawrence and the full report is available under the IEAA Member Centre at www.ieaa.org.au/member-centre.

Rob Lawrence is a leading researcher on international education sentiments, market dynamics, demand and drivers. Across the past three decades Rob has worked in 38 countries on projects for the Australian, British, New Zealand, Canadian and Singapore governments, all of Australia's state governments, many peak bodies (including IEAA), and over 90 universities, colleges and schools around the world. In 2014, Rob was presented with the highly prestigious 'Distinguished Contribution to International Education' award at the IEAA Excellence Awards.

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This summary report was prepared by Professor Christopher Ziguras, IEAA Research Director and Associate Dean, Global Language Studies at RMIT University's School of Global, Urban and Social Studies.

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Steering Committee

- Brett Berquist, Director International, University of Auckland
- Janelle Chapman, President, IEAA | CEO Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC)
- Emily O'Callaghan, General Manager, IEAA
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- Professor Christopher Ziguras, RMIT University

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Executive summary

In 2020, it was clear that during the COVID-19 pandemic, international students in Australia and New Zealand, like local students, had to deal with the closure of campuses and the abrupt shift to online learning, financial hardship, isolation and unrealised expectations.

However, international students did not often have access to the same level of access to family, friends and government support measures that was usually available to their local peers.

IEAA and Education New Zealand commissioned Rob Lawrence to undertake a major study to better understand domestic students' sentiments towards international students during the pandemic. The study explores the extent to which domestic students were aware of the challenges facing international students, the extent to which they provided support to international students, and whether their sentiments towards international students have shifted through the COVID-19 crisis.

This paper summarises the project's key findings. The first stage of this research involved interviews with 48 stakeholders, including students and individuals within educational institutions, government agencies, charities and emergency services who had first-hand experience of the support being provided to students during the pandemic. The second stage was a survey that was completed by 4,330 domestic and international students at 15 universities and five TAFE institutes in Australia and four universities in New Zealand.

This study confirms that the vast majority of domestic students in Australia and New Zealand were aware (to varying degrees) that international students were facing significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A large majority of domestic students, five out of six, were to some extent aware of the challenges faced by international students in 2020. Around half reported being slightly or moderately aware, while a third reported a higher level of awareness.

Around 90 per cent of those students who had some level of awareness were concerned about the challenges faced by international students in 2020. Around half reported being slightly or moderately concerned, with around 40 per cent reporting a higher level of concern.

Female students and Australian students were both more aware and more concerned about the plight of international students. The gender difference may be due to the generalised tendency of female survey participants to respond more empathically than males. The difference between Australia and New Zealand is likely due to the substantively different experiences in the two countries.

The results show that domestic students learned about the plight of international students primarily through mass media and social media.

In Australia, international students were not able to access the main government support programs, which led to many media reports about student hardship, and stories about support measures being provided by local governments, community organisations and education providers. Meanwhile in New Zealand, government support was not subject to a residency test and consequently there were fewer media reports about international student hardship.

Domestic students did not often learn about the hardships faced by international students via their educational experiences. This is perhaps due to the fact that campuses were closed in both countries and contact between students in online classes was usually quite limited.

A large majority of Australian and New Zealand citizens reported that their attitudes towards international students had changed during the pandemic, particularly in relation to practical hardships associated with living away from home and social isolation.

Around a quarter of all students (domestic and international) in both countries had been involved in providing support to other students during the pandemic. The most common forms of support provided included mentoring and tutoring (especially in New Zealand), followed by various forms of personal care. Interestingly, nearly 20 per cent of students in Australia who provided support to other students had been involved in food distribution. The most common prompts cited for providing this support was engagement with friends at their educational institution or witnessing hardship first-hand.

While news programs and social media were key in raising awareness, they didn't often spur students to take action, rather this was more often precipitated through direct contact with friends or other students needing assistance.

Of the quarter of students who had supported other students, one third reported providing support for international students specifically, and many more indicated they were unaware as to whether the student they supported were domestic or international. The support provided to international students specifically followed a similar pattern to the support provided to other students in general, most commonly involving learning support and psychosocial care. However, again, Australian students were more often providing support in the form of food distribution, assistance with completing requests for financial assistance, and help with accommodation, reflecting the lack of access to key government support programs in Australia.

The study also pointed to the support provided to international students by a wide range of organisations outside the education sector, such as community associations, charities, crisis lines and church groups, as well as aligned organisations including accommodation providers, publishers and alumni associations.

Education providers do not appear to have been particularly active in raising awareness of student hardship, or in prompting students to provide peer support to other students. This was perhaps a missed opportunity, and again this may be a result of stretched institutions focusing on providing direct support rather than mobilising students to provide peer support. Education providers may have been wary of encouraging face-to-face social contact between students during this period.

Still, the level of concern this study revealed about other students' welfare, coupled with the significant numbers of students who have been involved in providing help, point to the need for institutions to guide and support the caregiver in their student body. International students, this research found, were particularly active in providing support to other international students, and so would benefit from programs and advice that fosters peer-support.

A large majority of Australian and New Zealand citizens reported that their attitudes towards international students had changed during the pandemic, particularly in relation to practical hardships associated with living away from home and social isolation.



Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia and New Zealand, international students, like local students, had to deal with the closure of campuses and the abrupt shift to online learning, financial hardship, isolation and unrealised expectations, but without the same level of access to family, friends and government support measures that were usually available to their local peers.

Realising the gravity and scale of the challenges facing international students, many organisations stepped in to provide support and a layer of protection to international students as events unfolded. Thanks to the work of education providers, study clusters, government agencies and community associations students have, from time to time, had access to financial support, employment programs, food kitchens, counselling and study groups.

During this time, stories began to emerge in the media and among those working in international education suggesting that domestic students were becoming more aware of the challenges faced by international students and were actively offering support.

A mid-2020 survey that asked young Australians to rate their level of approval of various measures the Federal Government had implemented to deal with COVID-19 found that the two areas with the lowest level of support were the government's role in providing financial support for universities, and providing support for international students.¹

IEAA and Education New Zealand commissioned Rob Lawrence to undertake a major study to better understand domestic students' sentiments towards international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study explores the extent to which domestic students were aware of the challenges facing international students, the extent to which they provided support to international students, and whether their sentiments towards international students have shifted through this crisis.

¹ John Remington & Gavin White (2000) Political Attitudes & Covid-19 Survey 2020. Foundation for Young Australians (p.18) https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Foundation-for-Young-Australians-Reserach-Report-2020-D2-1.pdf?mc_cid=a3c5493470&mc_eid=a8703926ca

A detailed report on the project is available from IEAA. The full report also includes findings regarding international students' perceptions of their experiences during COVID-19. This paper summarises the key findings regarding domestic students' sentiments and actions to support international students.

Approach

The research consisted of two phases: interviews with stakeholders and a survey of domestic students in Australian universities and TAFEs and New Zealand universities.

In the first phase, interviews were carried out with 48 students and individuals within educational institutions, government agencies, charities and emergency services who had first-hand experience of the support being provided to international students during the pandemic. The focus of these interviews was to better understand how education providers, domestic students and other organisations understood and responded to the challenges faced by international students, and to gauge participants' views on the effectiveness of those initiatives.

The insights from these interviews informed the design of a survey that was completed by 4,330 domestic and international students in Australia and New Zealand. The survey comprised 77 questions with 800+ pre-coded response options, and included opportunities to provide a text response to some open-ended questions. An invitation to participate in the survey was sent to students by 15 universities, five TAFE institutes in Australia and four universities in New Zealand between late October and early December 2020.

The project was overseen by a steering group, whose members included:

- Brett Berquist, Director International, University of Auckland
- Janelle Chapman, President, IEAA | CEO Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC)
- Emily O'Callaghan, General Manager, IEAA
- Sahinde Pala, Director, Student Experience and Global Citizens, Education New Zealand
- Dr Davina Potts, Associate Director, University of Melbourne | Research Committee Chair, IEAA
- Professor Christopher Ziguas, RMIT University.

Survey completed by

4,330

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Located in

Australia & New Zealand

Survey comprised

77 questions

with **800+** pre-code responses options

Survey completed by

15 Universities in Australia

5 TAFE Institutes in Australia

4 Universities in New Zealand



Challenges faced by international students

As expected, the education sector stakeholders involved in the first phase of the study were acutely conscious of the wellbeing challenges facing international students, not least the sense of separation, financial hardship, and not knowing when they will be able to return home.

The survey asked the 2,705 domestic students 'How aware are you of the challenges faced by international students this year?' Only around one in six students reported that they had 'never thought about it' or were 'not aware'. Around half reported being 'slightly aware' or 'moderately aware'

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and the remaining third of domestic students reported being 'increasingly aware' or 'extremely aware'.

Female students reported a slightly higher level of awareness than males. Interestingly the response rate to the survey was significantly higher for female students, who comprised around two-thirds of participants, perhaps also reflecting a greater level of interest in the topic.

Australian domestic students also reported a higher level of awareness than their counterparts in New Zealand, with 36 per cent of Australians reporting being 'increasingly aware' or 'extremely aware' of the challenges faced by international students, compared with 29 per cent of New Zealanders.

Awareness levels were also higher among older participants, with a quarter of those aged over 45 reporting being 'very aware' compared with less than ten per cent of those aged under 23 years old.



Those respondents who indicated some level of awareness of the challenges faced by international students were then asked ‘How concerned are you about the challenges faced by international students this year?’ The results were similar, with around half of domestic students reporting being ‘slightly concerned’ or ‘moderately concerned’ and those who reported being ‘increasingly concerned’ or ‘extremely concerned’ more likely to be female, older and Australian.

The higher level of concern among Australians was paralleled in interviews, with most Australian interviewees expressing disappointment regarding the Australian Prime Minister’s much publicised comment earlier in 2020 that international students could opt to return home if they were experiencing hardship. Australian international education professionals interviewed felt that the legacy of this comment was etched in the long-term memory of many international students and was widely reported in their home countries, subsequently resulting in numerous enquiries from offshore connections.

New Zealand interviewees expressed lower levels of concern about lack of government support, reflecting the fact that in New Zealand COVID-19 support was not subject to a residency test as was the case in Australia.

Australian international education professionals interviewed felt that the legacy of this comment was etched in the long-term memory of many international students and was widely reported in their home countries, subsequently resulting in numerous enquiries from offshore connections.



Sources of information about the challenges faced by international students

Local students who indicated some level of awareness of the challenges faced by international students were asked 'Where did you first learn of the challenges experienced by international students?' and could select up to three information sources.

The most common source of information was 'media coverage', cited by 46 per cent of domestic students in Australia and 40 per cent in New Zealand, reflecting the more prominent media coverage in Australia. Social media and friends were also commonly cited as key sources of information.

Fewer students reported learning about international students' challenges through their study experience, either from their education provider, teachers or student associations. The exception was among research higher degree students, who are more likely to have close contact with international students and their supervisors.

The most common source of information was 'media coverage', cited by 46 per cent of domestic students in Australia and 40 per cent in New Zealand.

Did attitudes towards international students change?

Australian and New Zealand citizens were asked about the extent to which their attitudes towards international students had changed during the pandemic, using a ten-point scale where 1 indicated no difference and 10 meant an extreme difference.

A large majority of citizens reported that their views had changed in relation to most items, with a greater change in attitudes in relation to practical hardships associated with living away from home and social isolation.

As with other questions, female students reported a larger change in attitudes than male students, but there was no difference between Australian and New Zealand citizens.

Table 1. The extent to which the attitudes of Australian (n=1,313) and NZ (n=981) citizens have changed towards international students as a result of 2020 events.

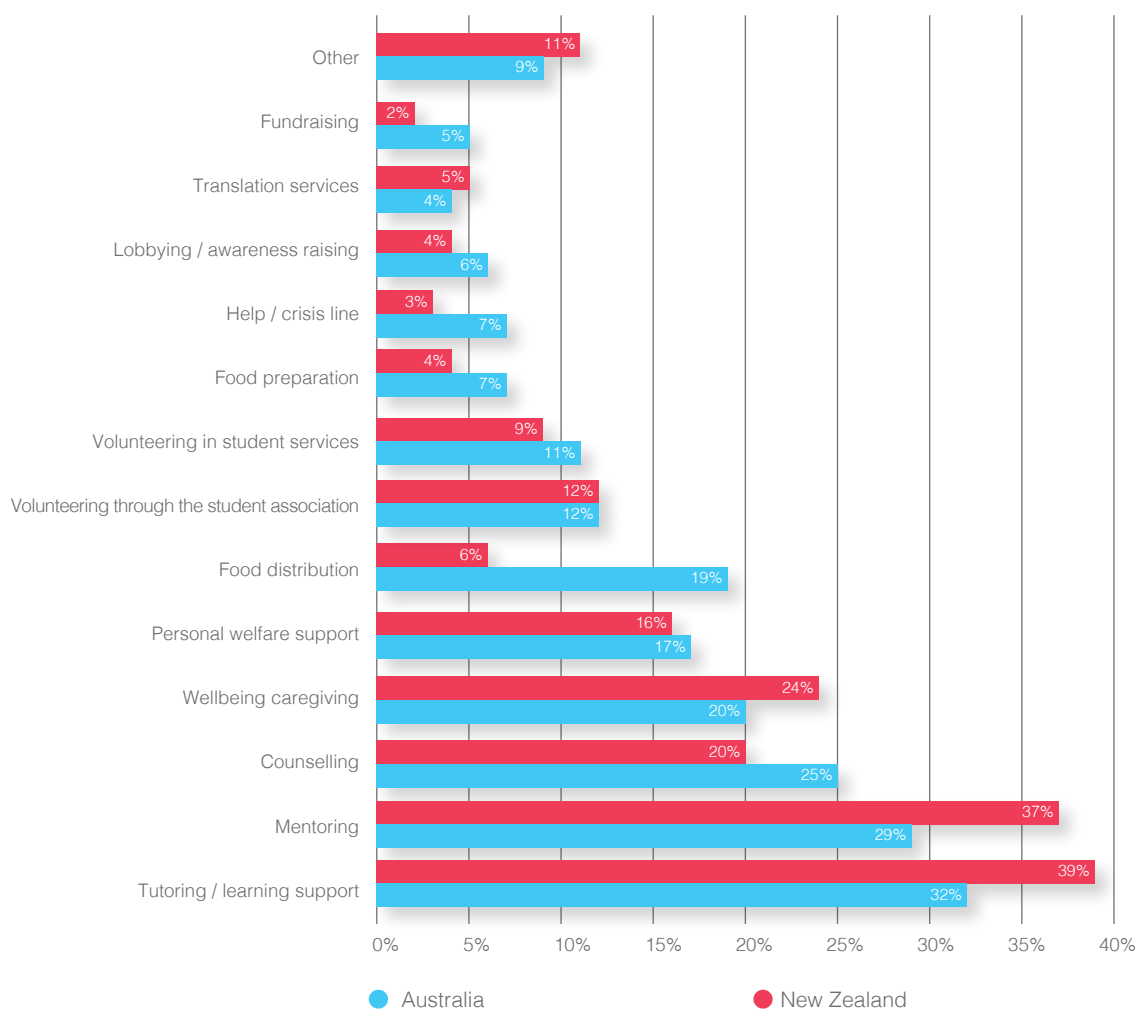
	MEAN, FEMALE	MEAN, MALE	REPORTING SOME CHANGE IN ATTITUDE
Appreciate their challenges of living away from home	6.1	5.2	81%
Their sense of separation and isolation	5.7	4.8	82%
Their resilience during challenging times	5.6	4.9	80%
Their ability to adjust to change	5.4	4.6	80%
Understanding about their day to day challenges	5.4	4.8	79%
Their desire to be part of the community	5.3	4.6	78%
Their diversity of backgrounds	5.1	4.3	75%
Their value as a source of talent	4.9	4.3	72%
Their willingness to help	4.8	4.1	73%

Providing support to other students

A quarter of all students surveyed (domestic and international) reported having provided support to other students during the pandemic. In both countries, international students were slightly more likely to provide support to others than were domestic students. In this section we are interested in supporting any other students, whether domestic or international.

The most common forms of support provided were mentoring and tutoring (especially in New Zealand), followed by various forms of personal care. Notably, nearly 20 per cent of students in Australia who provided support to other students had been involved in food distribution.

Chart 1: 'What type of support have you provided [to students in general]? Please select all that apply', percentage of those who had provided support, by country (n=1,102)

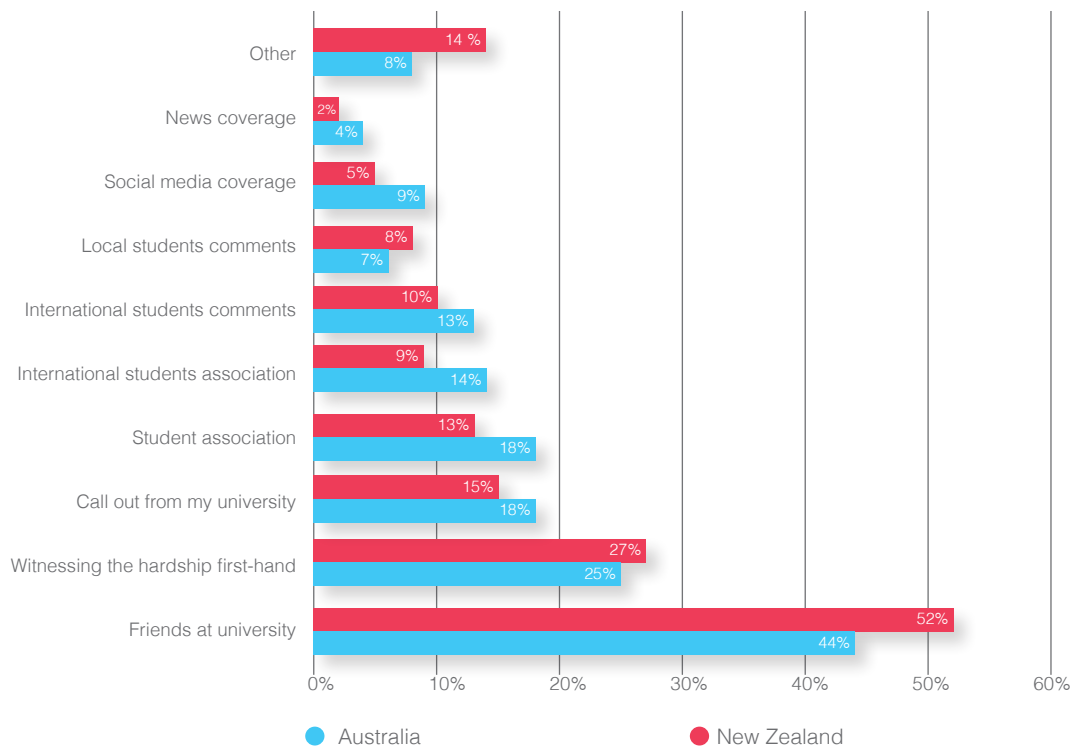


Students who had provided support to other students were asked about what had prompted them to provide support.

Having direct contact with the experience of other students was key for many students. Nearly half were prompted to act by 'friends at university' and a quarter by 'witnessing the hardship first-hand'.

Smaller numbers reported being spurred to act by their education provider or student associations. While news and social media coverage was significant in raising awareness, this information in itself seems not to have caused students to become active in providing support.

Chart 2: 'What prompted you to provide this direct support? Please select all that apply' (n=1,050)



THE VERBATIM RESPONSES HERE PROVIDE A RICHER GLIMPSE OF THE WAYS IN WHICH STUDENTS WERE DRAWN INTO HELPING, AND IN PARTICULAR THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHED SOCIAL NETWORKS:

'I noticed the need to start a group with friends'

'I was asked by a student in my class'

'Just unofficial through friends, self-directed'

'Directly through a request from a friend'

'I just offered help on my own accord'

'Asking the individual where they needed help and going from there'

'With a friend who had mental health issues, I helped them almost every day including several crises'

'I just provided support by being a friend'

'The students I mentored'



Providing support to international students

Those students who reported providing support to other students (around one in four of those surveyed) were asked whether they had provided 'specific support for international students'.

A third of those who had helped other students reported having provided specific support to international students, with a higher proportion among students in Australia (38 per cent) than in New Zealand (26 per cent).

In addition, more than a quarter indicated that they were 'unsure'. Upon deeper investigation, it became apparent that many of those who were unsure had provided support to groups of students rather than individuals, such as food preparation, social networking, advisory blogs and administrative support, and did not know whether the students they were supporting were domestic or international.

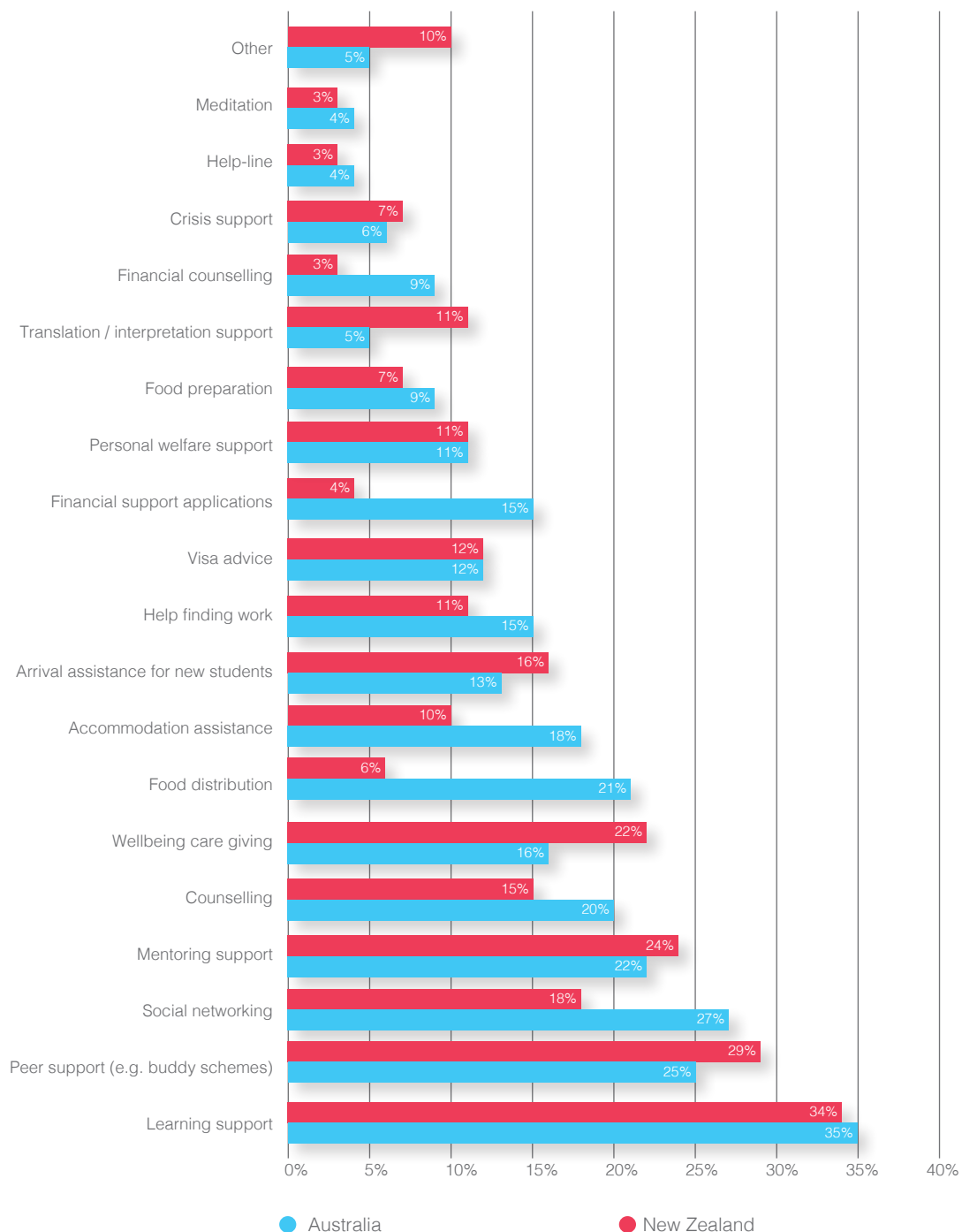
A high proportion of international students who helped others reported that they had supported international students in particular (68 per cent of those in Australia and 53 per cent of those in New Zealand).

This is perhaps unsurprising in light of the finding above that established social networks were important in prompting support, since international students are more likely to be already connected to other international students.

Respondents who had provided support for international students were asked to identify the types of support provided. These were similar to the types of support provided to other students in general, as illustrated in Chart 3, with learning support and psychosocial care being most commonly provided. Notably, Australian students more often provided support in the form of food distribution, assistance with completing requests for financial assistance, and help with accommodation.

While we must exercise caution due to the smaller sample size for this question, these results do point to a greater need for support with basic living conditions among international students in Australia (where major government programs were only available to citizens and permanent residents) compared with those in New Zealand (where key programs were also available to temporary residents).

Chart 3: 'What kind of support have you provided for international students? Please select all that apply', by country (n=369)





Providing specific support to international students through a community association

A small proportion of domestic students reported providing support to international students through a community organisation, outside of their university or TAFE, 8 per cent in Australia and 6 per cent in New Zealand. In both countries, voluntary and religious groups were the most common types of community organisations through which students provided support for international students.

Consistent with the findings in other questions, in Australia there was a significantly higher rate of engagement with support for meeting international students' basic needs, with charities, community welfare groups and accommodation support groups figuring more prominently than was the case in New Zealand.

In both countries, voluntary and religious groups were the most common types of community organisations through which students provided support for international students.

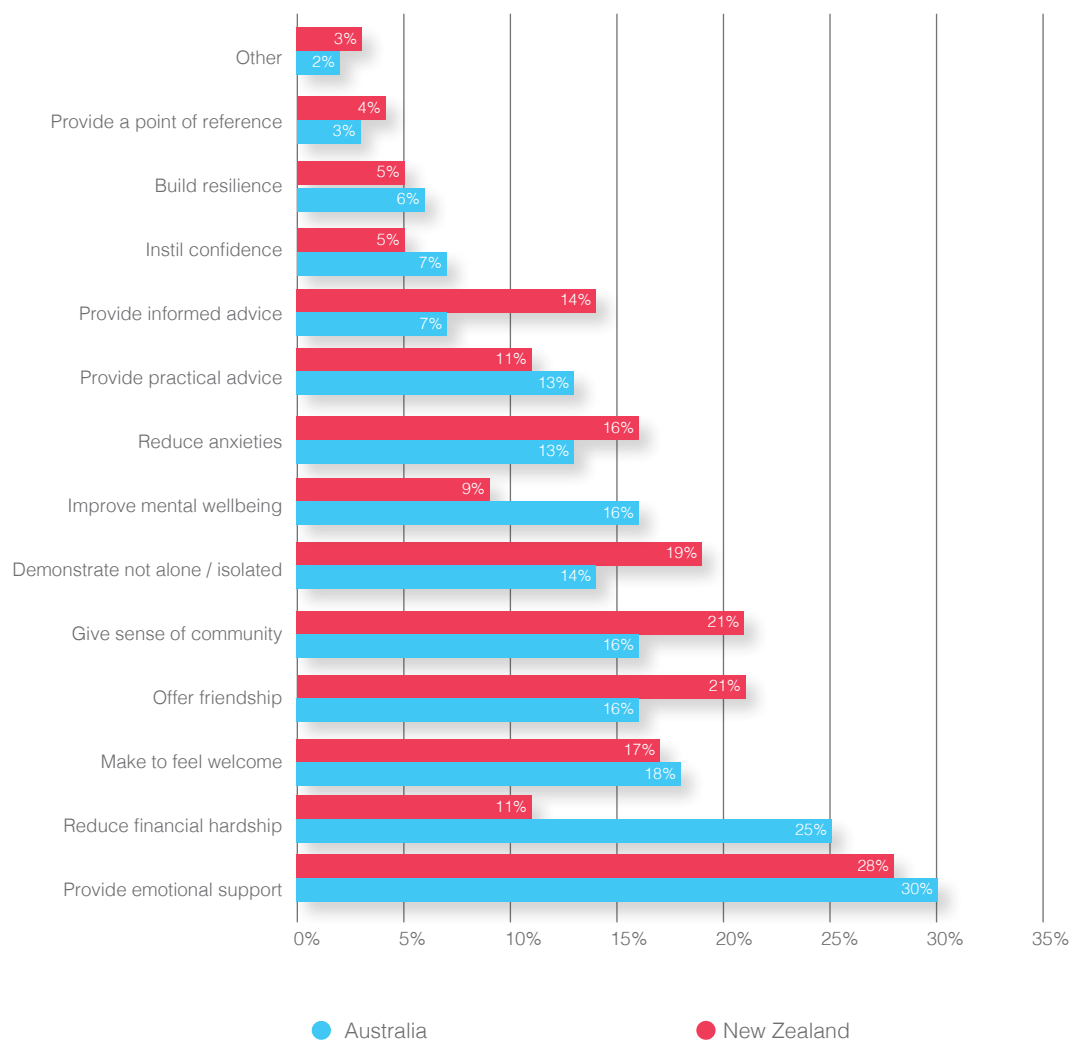
Outcomes sought through providing support to international students

Those respondents that reported having provided support to international students were asked what outcomes they hoped to achieve, providing an insight into individual motives and values.

As Chart 4 illustrates, again most of the top responses dealt with responding to the psycho-social needs of students.

The most stark difference between the two countries was in relation to reducing financial hardship in Australia, consistent with the pattern that has emerged across other questions. There was more focus among New Zealand students on enhancing social connectedness for international students.

Chart 4: 'In providing specific support for international students what outcomes have you hoped to achieve for these international students? Please select your top two options', by country (n=361)



Conclusion

This study confirms that the vast majority of domestic students in Australia and New Zealand were aware (to varying degrees) that international students were facing significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students' awareness of the challenges facing international students during the pandemic was primarily informed by media coverage and to a lesser extent friends. While we know education providers were actively providing support to international students in very trying circumstances, domestic students seem not to have learned much about international students' experiences through their studies or other contact with their institution. This may be a consequence of the limited social interaction afforded by online learning, coupled with the desire of institutions to focus on positive aspects of the study experience, and good news stories in general.

The pandemic does seem to have increased awareness of the challenges faced by international students in relocating to a new country. The difference in sentiments of female and male students across many questions was notable and surprising. This may reflect a higher level of empathy amongst female students generally.

Around a quarter of all students had been involved in providing support to other students, whether domestic or international, and these students were primarily spurred into providing support by friends or direct contact with students needing assistance. Education providers do not appear to have been particularly active in prompting students to provide peer support to other students. This is perhaps a missed opportunity, and again this may be a result of stretched institutions focusing on providing direct support rather than mobilising students to provide peer support. Education providers may have been wary of encouraging face-to-face social contact between students during this period.

We can identify three different types of support provided by students during the pandemic – psychosocial support, study support, and help to access material support, with the last of these being more significant in Australia. Much of this support appears to have been offered through friends and other informal social networks, and organised by groups of students themselves, and to a lesser extent through education providers or community-based organisations.

The findings in this report signal the willingness of domestic students to meaningfully engage with international students and the need to support greater ties between these cohorts. Institutions should consider more structured approaches to fostering peer-to-peer links to enhance the student experience for both international and domestic students.

The report also highlights the enhanced positive sentiments domestic students now have towards international students. Domestic students therefore have the potential to be active advocates in educating the broader community about the benefits of international education.

As we look to strengthen our social licence as a sector, it will be key to understand how this domestic cohort could act as ambassadors for international education through providing rich connections between international students and the wider community.



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