



# student voices

International students'  
experiences during  
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.

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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](http://www.ieaa.org.au/member-centre).

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## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to note thanks to the expertise and support of the Steering Committee who guided and contributed to the research.

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IEAA would like to thank the various community organisations, volunteers and students who provided and continue to provide support to international students experiencing hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Suggested citation

Lawrence, R. & Ziguras, C. 2021, Student Voices: International students' experiences during COVID-19, research report, International Education Association of Australia, [www.ieaa.org.au/studentvoices](http://www.ieaa.org.au/studentvoices).

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## Executive summary

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia and New Zealand, stories began to emerge in the media and among those working in international education suggesting that many domestic students, community organisations and businesses were becoming more aware of the plight of international students and were actively offering support.

Many international students were experiencing financial and emotional hardship, separation anxieties, isolation and unrealised expectations. They had been forced off campus and made to face unprecedented challenges, not at least feeling stranded and unable to know when they could next return home. During 2020, education providers, government agencies and community associations endeavoured to provide support and a layer of protection to international students as events unfolded.

IEAA and Education New Zealand commissioned Rob Lawrence to undertake a major study to better understand domestic students' sentiments towards international education during the pandemic. A summary of that research was published as *Student Voices: Domestic cohort engagement with international students through COVID-19*, IEAA, 2021.

In the course of that study, the project also collected extensive data on the experiences of international students in Australia and New Zealand during COVID-19, and this second report summarises the key findings specifically in relation to international students.



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.

### Key findings

- The most significant challenges faced by international students in Australia and New Zealand relate to their disconnection from their families back home, in particular concerns about family wellbeing, separation from family and not knowing when they can go home.
- A second set of challenges for international students related to their disconnection from the local community, including social isolation, lack of exposure to the campus community. They were more challenged by this local isolation than were domestic students, most likely because international students have fewer social supports to begin with, and hence rely more on the campus for social connection.
- The more practical challenges associated with study, employment and accommodation were on average rated as less significant.
- These patterns were similar for Australia and New Zealand, albeit with a slightly higher level of concern being expressed by international students in Australia. This was primarily due to more severe financial hardship for international students in Australia who were not able to access the major forms of emergency support, JobSeeker and JobKeeper, whereas in New Zealand, equivalent programs were available to temporary residents and locals alike. The resulting financial hardship disproportionately affected South Asian students in Australia, as they tend to be more dependent upon part-time work to cover living and study costs.
- Two thirds of international students who had been working in Australia prior to COVID lost all their work, compared with only 17% of local students whose employment was subsidised by the JobKeeper program. As a result, nearly half (45%) of international students in Australia reported that loss of employment was extremely challenging, compared with only 19% of domestic students.



- International students' loss of employment was not nearly so dire in New Zealand, because fewer students were working to begin with, a smaller proportion lost work, and those who lost work were able to access emergency financial assistance in the same way as local students.
- More than a quarter (28%) of international students in Australia and 15% in New Zealand reported having to change their accommodation as a result of the pandemic, most commonly due to financial pressures and the need to move to more affordable accommodation.
- The most important source of information regarding assistance and support accessed by international students during the pandemic was their education provider's website, followed by government websites.
- International students in Australia were primarily seeking advice, and practical support, to address financial hardship. One third of international students in Australia reported accessing food packages from their university, and a quarter from community organisations.
- Such pressing financial hardship was much less evident in New Zealand, where visa advice was the most commonly expressed need, due to visas needing to be renewed annually.
- In both countries, a majority of international students expressed positive sentiments in relation to the same four statements: 'still a beautiful place to live and study'; 'sense of friendly country'; 'genuine multicultural society'; and 'making international students feel welcome'. Chinese students, reassuringly, rated 'sense of a friendly country' slightly more favourably than the average in both countries.
- While these enduring characteristics of the host countries are still valued, students were less positive about the overall impact of their experiences during 2020. Students were particularly ambivalent about recognition of the financial hardships and social challenges of international students, with nearly as many students feeling negative as positive about those factors.



## Implications

This study has shown clearly that in Australia and New Zealand the impact of the pandemic was significantly worse for international students (compared to their domestic peers), in separation from family and friends back home, disconnection from the local community and campus as a result of social isolation, and loss of employment, particularly in Australia.

In both countries, education providers, community organisations, local governments and other students stepped up to help. There are opportunities in a post-COVID world for education providers and international education stakeholders to build upon and strengthen the networks of support that have been forged in a time of crisis. Strengthening international students' engagement with the community has long been on the agenda for institutions and we have an opportunity to formalise relationships between students and local sporting, religious, ethnic groups and many others. The pandemic also highlighted the critical importance of peer support provided by students to each other. Education providers may be able to enhance this by providing information and advice for caregivers, mental health first aid training for those in student clubs and associations and community organisations that work closely with international students.


The impact of Australia's decision to deny substantive emergency support to international students is revealed starkly in this study. For Australia, many organisations and individuals stepped up out of necessity, to provide emergency financial assistance and food. This was motivated by both a practical concern for the welfare of students and a need to ensure that vulnerable young people felt welcome and supported in their communities. Governments need to consider the effect emergency relief policies have on individual students, as well as to the host country's international reputation.

There are opportunities in a post-COVID world for education providers and international education stakeholders to build upon and strengthen the networks of support that have been forged in a time of crisis.

The findings of this study suggest that education providers, government agencies and other organisations involved in international education can support students through difficult periods by:

- developing student support strategies that explicitly recognise the contributions of a wide range of community organisations and students themselves in constituting a support 'ecosystem'
- recognising that students are the first point of contact for other students who need support, then develop resources for students who are providing support to their peers, whether through personal networks or through their involvement in clubs, social and community organisations
- strengthening partnerships between education providers and key local organisations that engage with students, including ethnic community groups, religious organisations, welfare groups and sporting clubs
- encouraging and supporting student-initiated projects that provide opportunities for social engagement and support
- using education providers' websites to connect students with a wide range of reputable sources of information and opportunities for social engagement with a wide range of partner organisations.

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## 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.

However, they lacked the same level of access to family, friends and government support measures that was 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, government agencies and community associations students have had access to financial support, employment programs, food kitchens, counselling and study groups, albeit to varying degrees.

IEAA and Education New Zealand commissioned Rob Lawrence to undertake a major study to better understand domestic students' sentiments towards international education during the pandemic. A summary of that research was published as *Student Voices: Domestic cohort engagement with international students through COVID-19*, IEAA, 2021.

In the course of that study, the project also collected extensive data on the experiences of international students in Australia and New Zealand during the pandemic, and this report summarises the key findings in relation to international students.



## Approach

The research consisted of two phases: interviews with stakeholders and a survey of domestic and international 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 students, of whom 1,115 were international students in Australia (1,036 university and 79 TAFE) and 489 international students in New Zealand.

The international students came from 77 different countries, with the largest source countries in the Australian sample being:

- India: 265
- China: 168
- Nepal: 74
- Malaysia: 57
- Bangladesh: 48
- Sri Lanka: 41
- Vietnam: 36
- Indonesia: 31
- Hong Kong: 31

The largest source countries in the New Zealand sample are:

- China: 112
- India: 72
- Malaysia: 36
- United States: 27

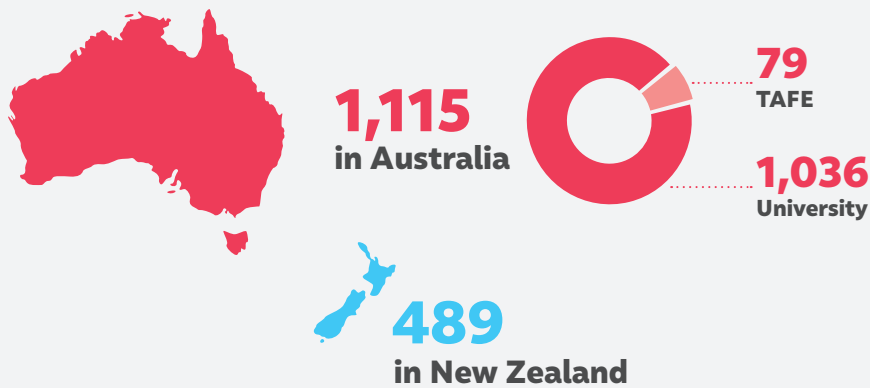
The survey comprised 77 questions with 800+ pre-coded response options, and included opportunities to provide a text response to some open-ended questions. An invitation to participate in the survey was sent to students by 15 universities and five TAFE institutions in Australia and four universities in New Zealand between late October and early December 2020.

Survey completed by:

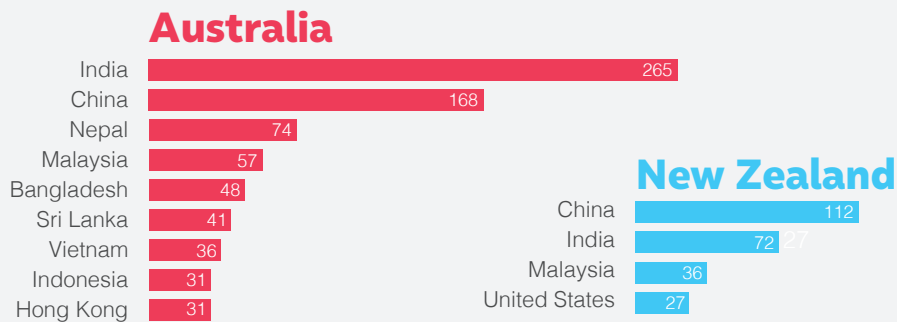
**4,330**  
students from

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International students' location was:



Largest source countries in:



Survey  
comprised

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

Student responses  
to the survey came from:

**15**  
Universities  
in Australia

**5**  
TAFE Intitutes  
in Australia

**4**  
Universities  
in New Zealand



## Challenges during the pandemic

During COVID-19, international students have faced a dual sense of disconnection. On the one hand, they have been isolated both from family and friends back home, worried about the welfare of loved ones, often in places where the virus has run out of control, and unsure of when they will see them again.

And at the same time, they have found it very difficult to build connections in their host country due to social isolation measures and the closure of campuses.

In this study, international students in Australia and New Zealand reported being most challenged by the disconnection from their families back home, with the three most challenging issues being anxieties regarding family wellbeing, separation from family and not knowing when they can go home. This disconnection was a major concern for most international students, with the majority rating their level of concern between 8 and 10 on the 10-point scale, where 1 represents no challenge and 10 represents extreme challenge. By contrast, only 15 per cent of domestic students rated separation from family as highly.

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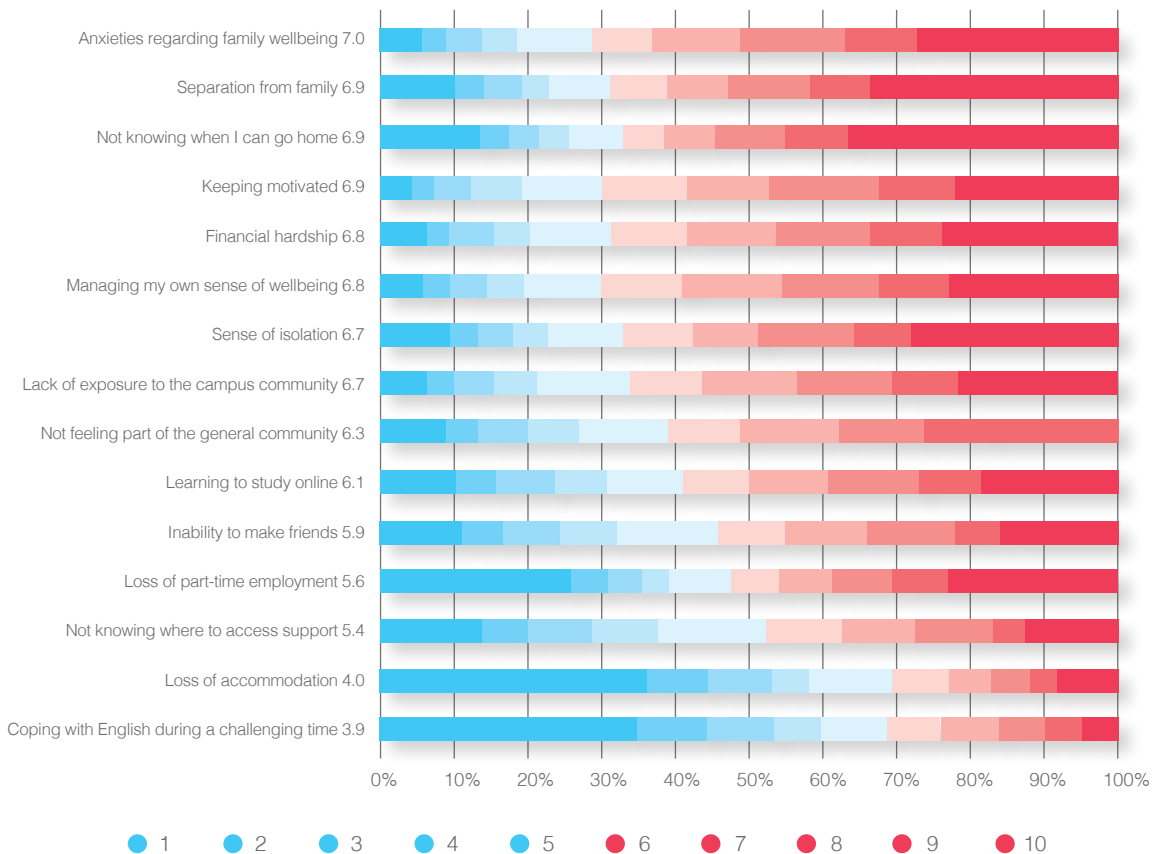
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The more practical challenges associated with study, employment and accommodation were on average rated as less significant. Employment experience was particularly polarised, however, with around a quarter of international students reporting that loss of employment was extremely challenging while at the other extreme another quarter were entirely unaffected.

International students reported being slightly less affected by disconnection from the local community, but still experienced this more strongly than did local students. They were more challenged than domestic students by social isolation (mean of 6.7/10 vs 5.6) and lack of exposure to the campus community (6.7 vs 5.1), most likely because international students have fewer social supports to begin with, and hence rely more on their campus for social connection.

Across both countries, a higher level of concern was expressed by three cohorts: younger international students, those who had arrived recently, and female students.

**Figure 1.** What are the greatest challenges you have experienced this year? (10-point scale from 0 = no challenge to 10 = extreme challenge, mean)



## Differences in student experience between Australia and New Zealand

These patterns were similar for Australia and New Zealand, albeit with a slightly higher level of concern being expressed by international students in Australia. There are two factors that help to explain this difference between the host countries. The first is the different conditions in the host countries. In Australia, the primary financial programs, JobSeeker and JobKeeper, were not available to support international students, whereas in New Zealand, equivalent programs were available to temporary residents and locals alike. The effects of this difference are borne out throughout this research.

Respondents also directly referenced the Australian Prime Minister's message that temporary residents experiencing hardship should return home. This sentiment damaged Australia's reputation among international students, very many of whom were unable to return to their home country.

A second factor is the difference in the mix of nationalities in the international student population in each country, in particular, the higher proportion of students from South Asia studying in Australia. These students rated most challenges more highly than students from other regions, and on many indicators this partly explains the differences between the two countries. For example, 72% of students from India and 61% of students from Nepal in Australia scored the 'financial hardship' as 8, 9 or 10 out of ten, compared with 38% of students from China and Malaysia. South Asian students are typically less likely to be able to rely on financial support from their family and rely more on work in the destination country to support themselves.

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## Employment

In Australia, prior to the pandemic, 52% of international students and 72% of domestic students had been employed. In the course of the pandemic, 35% of international students (two-thirds of those who had been working) lost all their work, and others had their hours reduced. By contrast, only 17% of local students (less than a quarter of those who were working) lost all of theirs. The Jobkeeper subsidy to employers was clearly effective in supporting the employment of local students, some of whom were being paid at a higher rate as a result. However, neither the Jobkeeper subsidy, nor the special Jobseeker unemployment benefits were available to international students.

This is borne out in students' assessment of how challenging they found the loss of employment. Nearly half (45%) of international students in Australia rated loss of employment at the extreme end of the scale (8 to 10), compared with only 19% of domestic students.

The situation was not quite so dire in New Zealand, both because fewer students were working to begin with, and because a smaller proportion lost work. There, only 34% of international and 62% of domestic students reported having been employed prior to the pandemic. By the time of the survey, 16% of international students (slightly less than half of those who had been employed) and 10% of domestic students (just one in six of those who had jobs) had lost all their work.

As expected, this led to a far smaller proportion of international students in New Zealand rating loss of employment as an extreme challenge, with just 25% rating it 8 to 10 on the scale, and just 12% of domestic students. Further softening the blow, international students in New Zealand, experiencing financial hardship due to loss of work, were able to access emergency support in the same way as were local students.

## Accommodation

A quarter of international students in Australia (28%) and 15% in New Zealand reported having to change their accommodation as a result of the pandemic, most commonly due to financial pressures and the need to move to more affordable accommodation. Reassuringly, despite this forced movement, few students rated accommodation among their most serious challenges during the pandemic (as Figure 1 illustrates), most likely because rental accommodation was relatively easy to access in this period.

Some education providers reported resistance from international students regarding the continuance of 'high' fees in light of reduced access to facilities and the loss of the on-campus teaching and learning experience.

## Adjustment to online study

With regards to the online transition, several stakeholders observed that international students had adjusted better than expected. Even so, there was widespread recognition that their experiences were hindered by their inability to access facilities, interact with students and staff, participate in extra-curricular options, access face-to-face support and cope with the overall loss of campus life and community. Some education providers reported resistance from international students regarding the continuance of 'high' fees in light of reduced access to facilities and the loss of the on-campus teaching and learning experience. Many students in this study echoed these sentiments. Students also argued, in interviews and in responses to open-ended survey questions, that tuition fees should have been reduced in recognition of the reduced access to facilities and services.

Despite the widespread disappointment at the loss of on-campus experience, which was of course also deeply felt by local students, when international students were asked what were the positive outcomes from the events of 2020, by far the most common response from international students was 'learning to study online'.





## Sourcing information about assistance and support

International students were asked to identify up to three sources they used to obtain information regarding assistance and support during the pandemic.

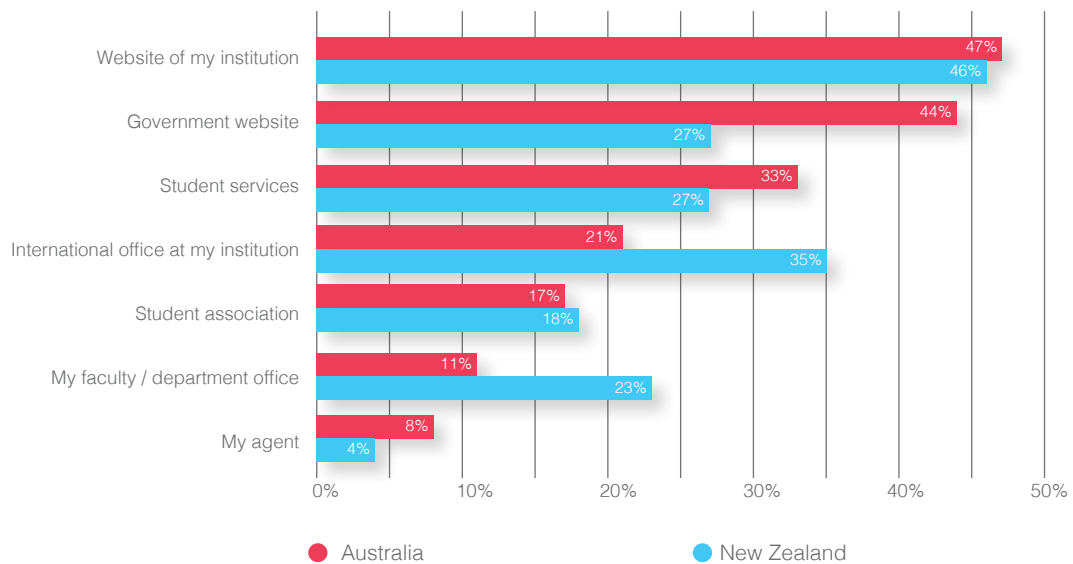
In both countries, nearly half reported consulting the university website, and just over a third reported consulting government websites. Around a quarter of students in both countries reported consulting 'student services', but around twice the number of New Zealand students reported consulting the international office at their university (34% vs 17%) or their faculty/department office (23% vs 11%), perhaps reflecting both a greater mainstreaming and centralisation of service provision in Australian universities. Surprisingly few students reported consulting their agent (less than 10% in Australia and less than 5% in New Zealand).

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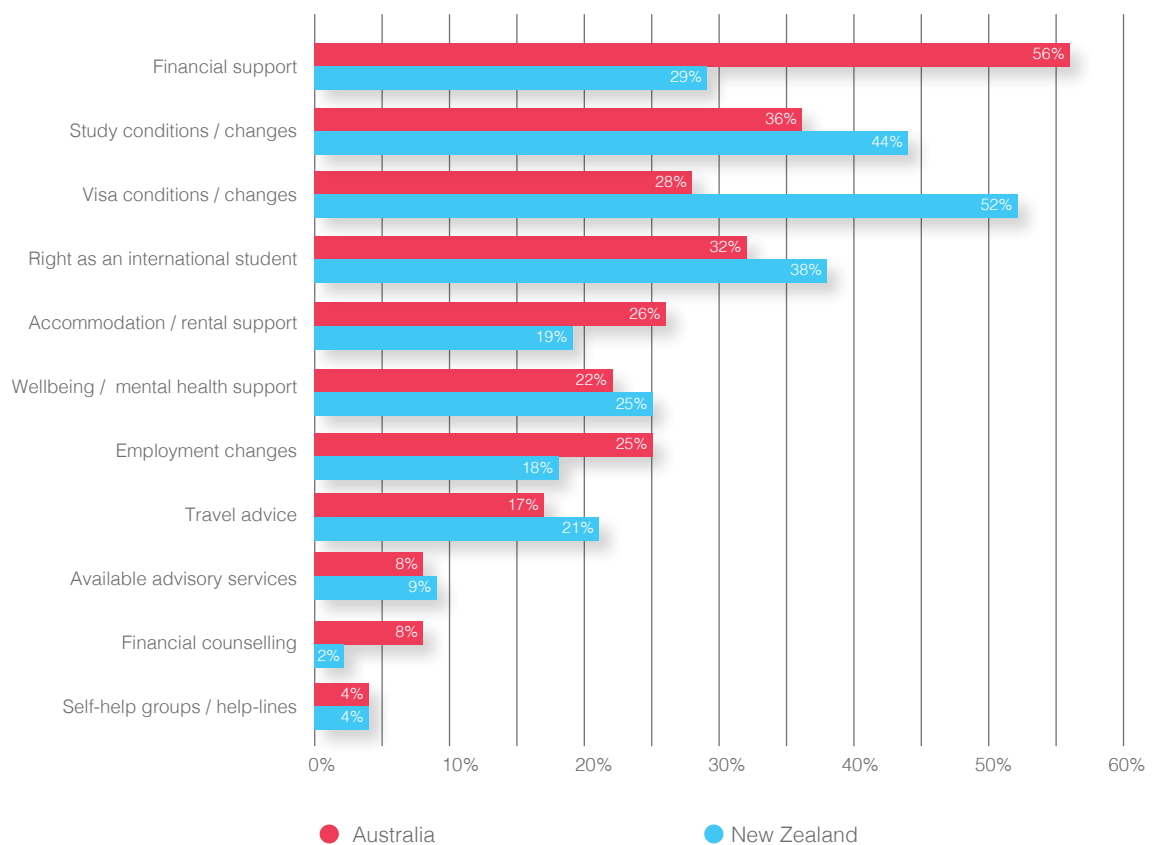
**Figure 2.** Where did you first turn to obtain information about the types of assistance and support available? (select up to three, n=1,449)



The majority of international students in Australia were seeking information regarding financial support, especially those students from South Asia, including 68% of students from Nepal and 66% of those from India. New Zealand international students most often sought visa advice, likely since visas need to be renewed each year whereas Australian visas are issued for the duration of the program. For international students in

both countries, information about study conditions was the second most sought after. International students who had sourced information were happy with the quality of that information. In both countries, around two-thirds of students expressed satisfaction with the ease of finding and understanding information, its clarity, usefulness and relevance, with less than 20% dissatisfied.

**Figure 3.** The types of information sought by international students (select up to three, n=1,449)





# Accessing support

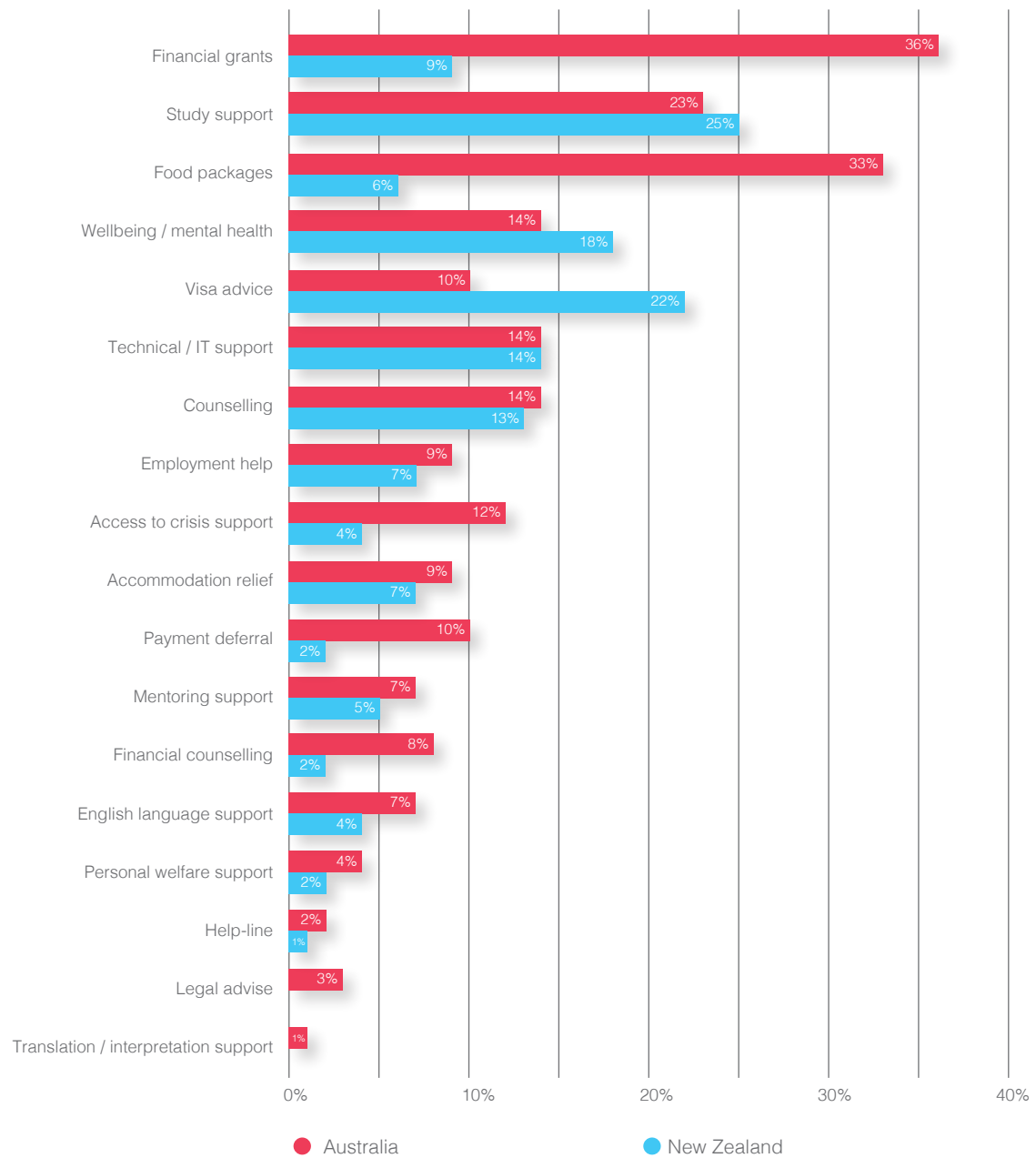
## Support provided by universities

The survey asked international students about the types of support they had accessed through their institution, and their assessment of the effectiveness of this support. The differences in the type of support provided in each country are striking, and reveal the impact of the dire situation many students faced in Australia, where international students were not able to access the major government support schemes. Australian universities stepped in to support students, providing financial grants, food packages, crisis support, payment deferral and financial counselling to large numbers of students.

The only area in which New Zealand universities provided significantly more support was in relation to visas, given the difference in duration, as visas are renewed annually in New Zealand.

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**Figure 4.** University support and services accessed by international students (n=1,544)





## Support provided by local students

As described in our previous report on this research, *Student Voices: Domestic cohort engagement with international students through COVID-19*, 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, followed by various forms of personal care. The most common prompts cited for providing this support were engagement with friends at their educational institution or witnessing hardship first-hand.

International students were asked to assess the support provided by Australian students towards international students on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is no support and 10 is very strong support. Fewer than one in five international students rated the support they had received highly (8-10), with average scores ranging from 4.4/10 for emotional support to 4.9/10 for learning support, with very similar responses across the two countries.

While this is disappointing, the survey was undertaken during a period of closed campuses and very limited social contact between students, and some of the respondents were located offshore.

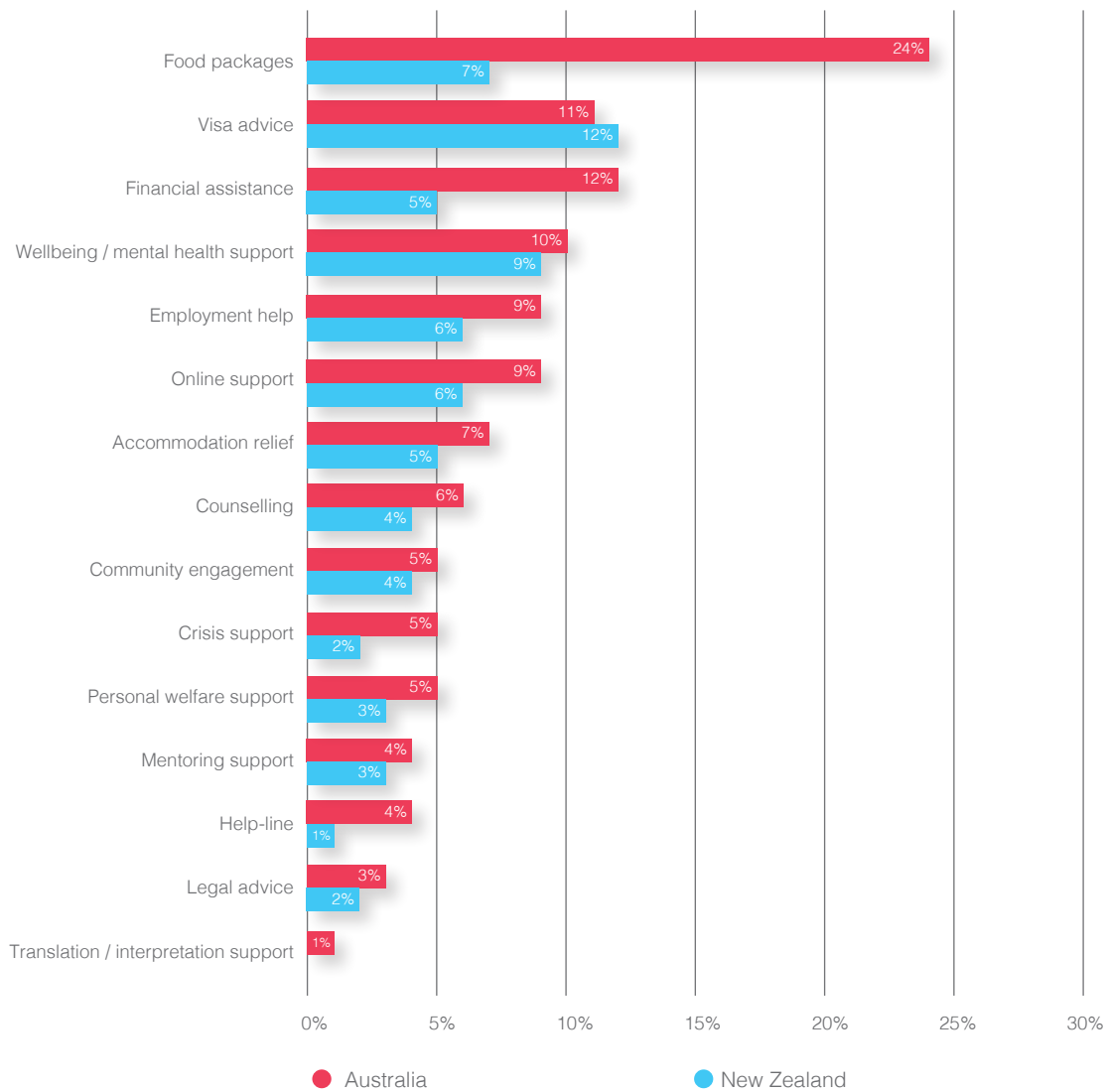
The most common forms of support provided included mentoring and tutoring, followed by various forms of personal care. The most common prompts cited for providing this support were engagement with friends at their educational institution or witnessing hardship first-hand.

## Support provided by community associations

International students were asked what support areas and services, if any, they have accessed through a local community association (as distinct from their university or TAFE). 57% of international students in Australia and 42% in New Zealand had accessed some form of support this way. As Figure 5 illustrates, students sought a wide variety of types of support.

Here too we see international students in Australia needing more support for basic needs – with significantly higher demand for food packages, financial assistance and crisis support – stemming from those students’ inability to access the major forms of income support and welfare benefits that were provided to the broader community. Students from South Asia were hardest hit, with food packages being accessed by 39% of international students from Nepal, 32% of those from Bangladesh and 30% of those from India.

**Figure 5.** Support accessed by international students through a local community association (n=1,582)





## Impact upon attitudes towards Australia and New Zealand

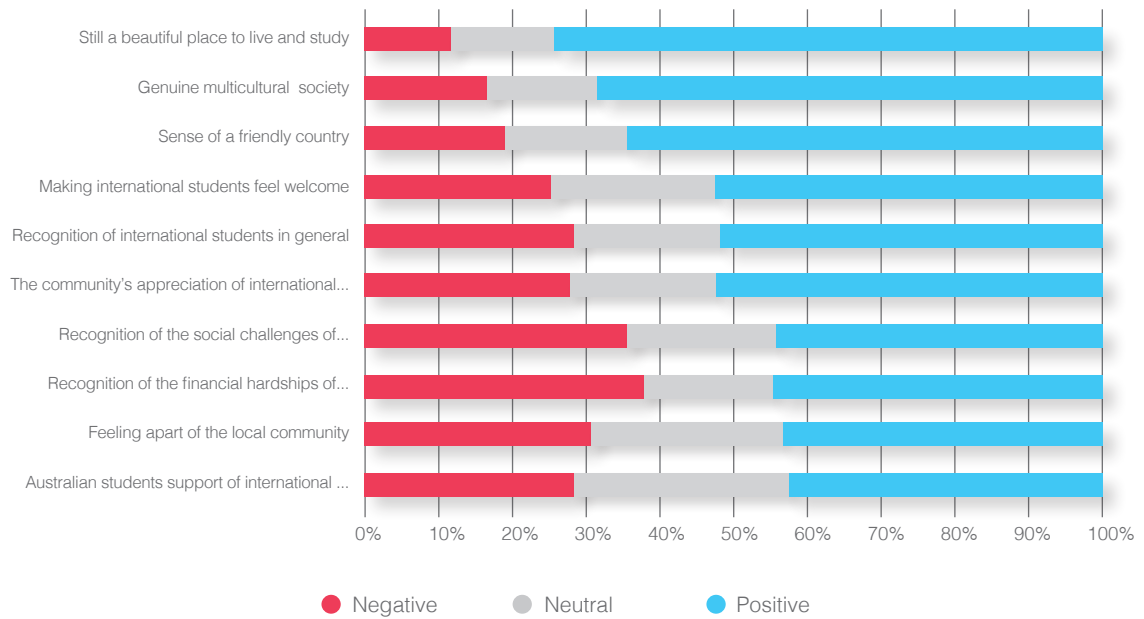
The survey asked international students to rate the extent to which various factors had positively and negatively impacted their perceptions of their host country.

In both countries, a majority of international students expressed positive sentiments in relation to the same four statements: 'still a beautiful place to live and study'; 'sense of friendly country'; 'genuine multicultural society'; and 'making international students feel welcome'. Chinese students, reassuringly, rated 'sense of a friendly country' slightly more favourably than the average in both countries.

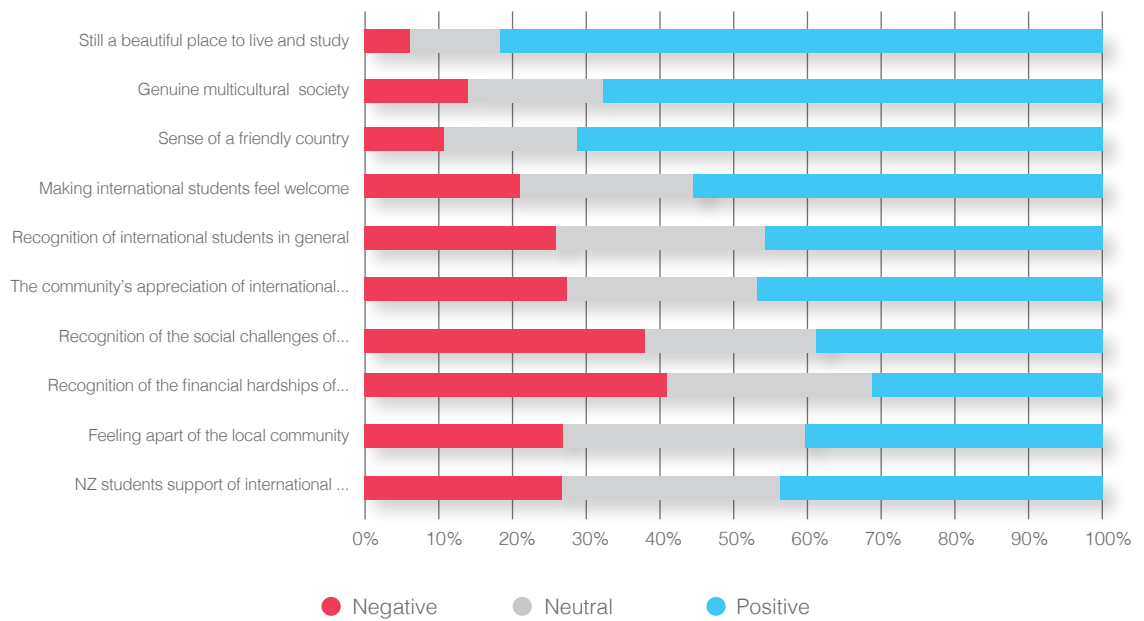
While these enduring characteristics of the host countries are still valued, students were less positive about the overall impact of their experiences during 2020. There were mixed views regarding the recognition of the financial hardships and social challenges of international students, with nearly as many students feeling negative as positive about those factors.

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**Figure 6. Attitudes towards Australia (n=1,096)**



**Figure 7. Attitudes towards New Zealand (n=486)**







## Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, international students all over the world have experienced isolation, separation, financial hardship and multiple anxieties. The transition to online studies created an additional divide because of the physical distance from their place of study, their primary point of reference for on campus learning, student life, sense of community and support services.

In Australia and New Zealand, it is very clear that all tertiary students, domestic and international alike, have been severely disrupted by the pandemic. All students experienced personal challenges, including keeping motivated, coping with social isolation, maintaining wellbeing and loss of part-time work.

However, this study has shown clearly that in Australia and New Zealand the impact of the pandemic was significantly worse for international students, in three main areas.

First, international students' separation from family and friends back home was experienced as the most challenging aspect of the pandemic. The unpredictable health situation in home countries, coupled with the inability to travel, or to know when in the future travel might be possible, was difficult for many students.

Second, international students were more affected by social isolation than domestic students, because they have less extensive support networks in place, have fewer points of connection to the local community, and are in the process of adjusting to a new social environment. This disconnection from the host community was especially felt by younger students and those who had recently arrived in Australia and New Zealand.

Third, international students were more affected financially, being far more likely to lose their employment, and in Australia not having access to the major emergency support payments.

Recognising this hardship, Australian and New Zealand education providers, governments, community organisations, and students have done much to alleviate the distress of international students. International students were able to access information during the pandemic from government agencies and education providers and were generally satisfied with the quality of this advice. Across both countries, international students were provided with learning support, mentoring and a wide range of social supports by many organisations. In Australia, students also relied heavily on the provision of emergency financial assistance, food packages, accommodation and crisis support.

These efforts have definitely had a positive impact upon both domestic and international student attitudes and perceptions. There were many international students who genuinely appreciated the efforts of domestic students, institutions, community associations and government agencies, to navigate their way through the events of 2020. However, for every student who acknowledged these efforts, there were many more who felt that their individual circumstances had been overlooked.

In addition, many students felt that with the shift to online learning and the closure of campuses they were not receiving what they had paid for. Their campaigns for fees to be reimbursed or reduced were largely unsuccessful, leading many international students to feel that institutions did not genuinely recognise their predicament. The term 'cash cow' frequently appeared in interviews and open-ended survey questions.


How will this experience affect these students' lasting impressions of Australia and New Zealand? This is not a simple question. Many of us have wondered over the course of the pandemic how we will look back on this episode in years to come. Much will depend on how we emerge from the crisis and what awaits us on the other side. When asked in late 2020 about their feelings towards their host countries, these international students were clearly still enamoured of the deep attributes of both countries – the beauty of the places, their welcoming communities and their diversity. And yet, it is clear that many international students have been disappointed by a lack of recognition of the hardships they have endured.







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