



## **Racism, exclusion and poverty: key factors reducing international student safety**

The Academy of the Social Sciences, the Australian Human Rights Commission and Universities Australia worked in partnership to plan and deliver the *Racism and the Student Experience Policy Research Workshop* on 31 March 2010.

The purpose of the Workshop was to assess available data from social science research to assist with the prevention of racially motivated crimes against international students and improve international student safety.

The current international student population in Australia has grown exponentially in recent years. This figure grew from under 150,000 in 2000 to 560,000 in 2009. Australia has a higher proportion of international students (as part of its total country population) than any other country in the world. The Workshop participants agreed that while the growth of international education has been a positive development for Australia, there needs to be a proportional investment in international student support services.

The Workshop participants agreed that segments of the international student population in Australia are at risk of experiencing multiple forms of discrimination. They also agreed that the international student population in Australia has a discernable set of mandatory human rights, including their rights to security of person, non-discrimination, housing and information.

International students contribute significantly to Australia's education services exports, but it is not appropriate to view them solely as a consumer category. They are consumers, students, temporary migrant workers and part of a group whose global mobility may cause them to live in precarious circumstances. When international students arrive in their host country, they leave their own citizenship rights at home.

International students residing in Australia are not a homogenous group and do not have 'standard' experiences. They come from over 200 countries, speak diverse languages and have unique personal and family circumstances. There is strong evidence to suggest that most international students have a positive student experience in Australia. The majority of international students residing in Australia have nominated to study here because of the quality and international reputation of our education system. However, evidence also suggests that some students, particularly those from non-European and non-English speaking backgrounds, experience multiple forms of discrimination in the broader community, including racial hatred and violence.

Participating academics discussed the recent high profile attacks on international students in Australia. A clarification was made that not all attacks are on students and certainly not all attacks have been on overseas students. Many Australians of 'Indian' and 'Sri Lankan' 'appearance' have also been attacked. Participating academics noted that there is no official national data on racially motivated crime. There are also significant gaps in relevant national survey data, for example the Australian Bureau of Statistics Household Survey and the Victims of Crime Survey. When considering how to determine whether a crime is racially motivated, participants noted the following:

- incidents range across a spectrum
- in some cases racism is a clear motivator for a particular crime
- in some cases racism is not a clear motivator but still shapes a crime

- in some cases racism can become an element of an existing dispute (use of racist language)
- in some cases motivation is ambiguous
- we don't understand enough about the perpetrators
- we need reform around the collection of policing data.

Participating academics went on to discuss the vulnerabilities that caused some people or groups of people to become subject to crime. Indian students on average tend to have less economic security than other international students and subsequently are exposed to high risk situations. Participants cited examples such as:

- living in overcrowded and low income housing
- working in precarious employment situations
- travelling to and from work late at night on public transport.

Participating academics discussed discrimination and exclusion and their impact on international student safety and well-being. The general context of international student safety issues were canvassed and concern was expressed about the long-term absence of a federal multicultural policy. Participants also discussed racism against visible minorities in Australia with reference to the following data sets from Professor Kevin Dunn's *Challenging Racism Project*<sup>1</sup>:

- around 85% of respondents believe that racism is an issue in Australia
- around 19% of respondents have experienced racist talk/verbal abuse
- 11% of respondents had experienced culture based exclusion.

Data collected through research conducted by Professor Marginson, Dr Nyland and Dr Forbes-Mewett on a sample of 200 international students found that<sup>2</sup>:

- 50% had experienced discrimination
- a small percentage of students had experienced violent incidents, but they all had a racial element
- appearance and language were key triggers for discrimination.

Academics agreed that some international students routinely experience, and have less resources to cope with:

- personal, social and cultural loneliness and isolation
- having an 'outsider' status
- workplace exploitation
- experiences of street abuse (in particular racist verbal abuse)
- discrimination in the private rental market.

Despite gaps in data, it was recognised that there is sufficient evidence to call directly for a renewed focus on addressing racial inequality and intolerance in Australia and affirming human rights principles. Academics identified that race discrimination could potentially undermine the

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<sup>1</sup> **Dunn**, Kevin M., Forrest J., Pe-Pua, R., Hynes M. and Maeder-Han, K. (2009) "Cities of race hatred? The spheres of racism and anti-racism in contemporary Australian cities", (2009) 1(1), *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1-14; **Dunn**, K.M., Forrest J., Babacan H., Guerin B., Paradies Y., Pedersen A., Kenna, T, Nelson, J. Maeder-Han, K. 2009: *Submission to the National Human Rights Consultation*, Attorney Generals Department, Canberra; **Dunn**, K.M., Forrest, J., Burnley, I. & McDonald, A., "Constructing racism in Australia" (2004) 39(4), *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 409-430

<sup>2</sup> Nyland, C., Forbes-Mewett, H., Marginson, S., Ramia, G., Sawir, L., Smith, S. (2009) 'International Student Workers in Australia: A New Vulnerable Workforce', *Journal of Education and Work*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 1-14

progress of the international education sector and social cohesion across Australian communities.

Participating academics identified a critical need for:

1. a major national study on the experiences of temporary migrants in Australia
2. research on international student population in Australia in the following key areas:
  - income and expenditure data
  - living and working conditions
  - experiences of discrimination
  - strategies to support safe international student experiences.

The Academy of the Social Sciences, the Australian Human Rights Commission and Universities Australia resolved to:

- produce a discussion paper from the *Racism and the Student Experience Policy Workshop*
- hold two subsequent workshop sessions to create dialogue between academics and key policy makers on the existing evidence base around international student safety
- promote international student safety as a whole of community issue
- call for a strategic approach to addressing racism in Australia and the development of a national anti-racism strategy.