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International student workers in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

International student workers' plights in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic raise questions regarding the rights of students as a special group of mobile workers, and future student mobility to the region.

Theme

Mobile Livelihoods

Keywords

Race, labour, mobility, pandemic, precarity, China, Asia, Australia, New Zealand

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Introduction

In many contexts, migrants with temporary or insecure legal status are considered some of the labour market's most vulnerable subjects. In her work on migrant labour in the UK, Bridget Anderson acknowledges that "immigration controls function as a mould...[producing] 'precarious workers' over whom employers and labour users have particular mechanisms of control."² In Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, international student workers are one of these affected groups. With its wide-reaching consequences for international mobilities and economies, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought migrants' labour precarity into sharper focus. This group of migrant workers is diverse, and often racialised, comprising thousands of nationals of Asian countries.

This entry examines the experiences of international student workers in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic. While many international students have stayed in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during COVID-19, the pandemic's socio-economic consequences, as well as their political reception by both countries' governments, have shaped their need for and ability to carry out various types of work. International students in Australia have also reported incidents of racialised violence and discrimination at work, indicating that their racialisation is a salient factor that conditions their labour experiences. It will conclude by raising questions regarding the future of student mobilities to Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand.

International student workers in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand

In 2018, there were almost 869,709 overseas students in Australia, most of them enrolled in courses of higher education, vocational education, or intensive English language courses.³ Many of these students are active in the local labour market: the Australian Subclass 500 student visa entitles holders to work for up to 40 hours every 2-week period for the duration of their course.⁴ Meanwhile, in 2017, Aotearoa-New Zealand had 61,300 international students in formal tertiary study. Most tertiary students carrying an Aotearoa-New Zealand student visa can also work up to 20 hours a week during term time, and full-time during study breaks, while postgraduate research student have no restrictions on the numbers of hours they may work.⁵

In both countries, a significant proportion of international students are nationals of Asian countries. Australia receives significant numbers from China, India, and Nepal,⁶ and New Zealand from China, India, and the Philippines.⁷ In both countries, international students are therefore racialised and minoritised groups. Their racialisation can, in turn, influence their everyday lives in their host-

² Anderson, Bridget. 2010. Migration, immigration controls and the fashioning of precarious workers. *Work, Employment and Society* 24(2): 300.

³ Australian Government, Department of Education and Training. 2019. *International Student Enrolments in Australia 1994-2018*. Available online at: <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/International-Student-Data/Documents/INTERNATIONAL%20STUDENT%20DATA/2018/2018%20Time%20Series%20Graph.pdf>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

⁴ Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs. *Subclass 500: Student Visa*. Available online at: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/student-500#When>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

⁵ New Zealand Immigration. *Working on a student visa*. Available online at: <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/options/study/working-during-after-your-study/working-on-a-student-visa>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

⁶ Studies in Australia. *The facts and figures of international students in Australia*. Available online at: <https://www.studiesinaustralia.com/Blog/australian-education-news/the-facts-and-figures-of-international-students-in-australia>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

⁷ New Zealand Government, Education New Zealand. 2015. *New Zealand: International Education Snapshot*.

countries, including their experiences of labour: even before the pandemic, Chinese international students were among the most precarious groups in the Australian labour market.⁸

Research in both countries also indicates that international students commonly encounter financial hardships. In Aotearoa-New Zealand, Butcher and McGrath find that many students may feel obligated to provide for their families at home through remittances, or struggle to meet their everyday needs.⁹ They further find that students who encounter “unexpected needs,” including “theft, accidents, fines or tenancy requirements” can be financially at risk. The Migrant Worker Justice Initiative (MWJI) has repeatedly found that international students have been subject to exploitation by landlords and employers.¹⁰ The following sections will further examine how the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic have exacerbated these risks.

To stay or to go: mobility responses during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen many international students ‘stranded’ in their countries of nationality; many of those who were abroad at the time of Australia’s and Aotearoa-New Zealand’s external border closures have been prevented from returning to complete their studies.¹¹ However, many international students have stayed in place throughout the pandemic. Data from Australia’s Department of Home Affairs illustrates 73% of higher education students, and 78% of postgraduate research students, have stayed in Australia during the pandemic.¹² Students’ reasons for staying vary: anecdotal evidence suggests that some students were unable to return to their countries of nationality due to travel bans or a lack of affordable flights, while others decided to stay as they had already paid their tuition fees, and understood that leaving the country would jeopardise their ability to return, given Australia’s incoming travel ban on all excepting citizens and permanent residents.¹³ MJWI finds that many of their temporary migrant respondents stayed in Australia as flights were unavailable or unaffordable, because their countries’ borders or key transit countries’ borders were closed, or because there were domestic travel restrictions in their home country that prevented them from reaching their home town.¹⁴ However, the majority stayed as they had invested their lives in Australia, and due to the country’s border closures, understood that they may not have been able to

⁸ Farbenblum, Bassina and Laurie Berg. 2020. *International Students and Wage Theft in Australia*. Sydney: Migrant Worker Justice Initiative.

⁹ Butcher, Andrew, and Terry McGrath. 2008. *International Students in New Zealand: Needs and Responses*. *International Education Journal* 5(4): 540-551.

¹⁰ Berg, Laurie and Bassina Farbenblum. 2019. *Living Precariously: Understanding International Students’ Housing experiences in Australia*. Sydney: Migrant Worker Justice Initiative; Farbenblum and Berg. 2020; Reilly, Alexander, Joanna Howe, Laurie Berg, Bassina Farbenblum and George Tan. 2017. *International Students and the Fair Work Ombudsman*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide.

¹¹ Bonnett, Gill. 2020. Graduate international students locked out of New Zealand plead for exemption. *Radio New Zealand*. 19 November 2020. Available online at: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/431017/graduate-international-students-locked-out-of-new-zealand-plead-for-exemption>. Last accessed 13 January 2021; Vivian, Steve and Felicity James. 2020. International students land in Australia for first time since coronavirus shuttered borders. *ABC News*. 30 November 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-30/international-students-arrive-in-australia-coronavirus-nt/12933370>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

¹² Lehmann, Angela and Aasha Sriram. 2020. 4 out of 5 international students are still in Australia – how we treat them will have consequences. *The Conversation*. 31 August 2020. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/4-out-of-5-international-students-are-still-in-australia-how-we-treat-them-will-have-consequences-145099>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

¹³ Morris, Alan, Catherine Hastings, Shaun Wilson, Emma Mitchell, Gaby Ramia and Charlotte Overgaard. 2020. *The experiences of international students before and during COVID-19: Housing, work, study and wellbeing*. Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney.

¹⁴ Berg, Laurie and Bassina Farbenblum. 2020. *As if we weren’t humans: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19*. Sydney: Migrant Worker Justice Initiative.

return if they chose to leave.¹⁵ The pandemic's consequences for international movement have therefore shaped this group's (im)mobility.

Political responses to international students

Both countries have adopted differing approaches to providing institutional support to international students during the pandemic. The Australian response is widely viewed to be a rigid one.¹⁶ In April 2020, Australia's Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, announced it was time for international students without any means of supporting themselves to 'go home'.¹⁷ While the Australian government has not introduced a targeted support scheme for international students, it has provided some funding to various non-profit organisations to assist temporary migrants, including international students, who are not eligible for state welfare benefits or other public assistance. Still, a report by the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) reveals that the "general feeling" among their Australian international student respondents is that support from the government and relief-providing organisations is not strong, and that many international students have struggled to meet their basic needs.¹⁸

In contrast, Aotearoa-New Zealand has made provisions for multiple forms of assistance to migrant workers, including international student workers, listed below:

Policy/scheme	Impacts
COVID-19 wage subsidy	Employers adversely impacted by the pandemic may therefore receive financial assistance to continue paying their employees, even if they carry temporary visas. ¹⁹
\$1 million hardship fund for international students	Paid to education providers, community groups, peak bodies or other organisations that work to support international students, who may individually claim up to \$1,000 in assistance. ²⁰
Assistance to Foreign Nationals Impacted by Covid-19 Programme'	Allows temporary migrants financial assistance to meet their basic needs, including rent, food, and medical care. ²¹
Supplementary Seasonal Employer Work Visa	Available to foreign nationals carrying student or visitor visas. Permits six months of seasonal work in the horticulture or viticulture industries if there are not enough New Zealanders available to do the work. ²²

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Berg and Farbenblum. 2020.

¹⁷ Gibson, Jano and Alexis Moran. 2020. As coronavirus spreads, 'it's time to go home' Scott Morrison tells visitors and international students. *ABC News*. 3 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-03/coronavirus-pm-tells-international-students-time-to-go-to-home/12119568>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

¹⁸ Morris et al. 2020.

¹⁹ Employment New Zealand. 2020. *Wage subsidy schemes*. Available online at: <https://www.employment.govt.nz/leave-and-holidays/other-types-of-leave/coronavirus-workplace/wage-subsidy/>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

²⁰ New Zealand Education, 2020. *International Student Hardship Fund*. Available online at: <https://enz.govt.nz/news-and-research/international-student-hardship-grant-fund/>.

²¹ NauMai NZ. 2020. *The coronavirus: what you need to know*. Available online at: <https://naumainz.studyinnewzealand.govt.nz/help-and-advice/healthcare/the-coronavirus-what-you-need-to-know/>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

²² New Zealand Immigration. 2020. *Information about Supplementary Seasonal Employer Work Visa*. Available online at: <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/apply-for-a-visa/about-visa/supplementary-seasonal-employment-sse-work-visa>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

While numerous media reports and surveys document Australian international students' dissatisfaction with their political reception, Aotearoa-New Zealand has been widely lauded for its management of COVID-19 and continues to rank highly among the world's most desirable destinations for international education.²³

Working during the pandemic

In Australia, where institutional support for temporary migrants during the pandemic has been weak, many international students have worked to support themselves since March in poorly paid or unpaid jobs.²⁴ In Aotearoa-New Zealand, media reports suggest that many international students have lost their part-time jobs during the pandemic, and are reliant on support from the government, universities and NGOs.²⁵ The Ministry of Education further recognises that many international students might struggle to find work, as opportunities for work are more limited than before the pandemic.²⁶

In both countries, however, some allowances have been made to accommodate international students' need for work. In Australia, 20 hour working week restrictions have been relaxed for some students working in health, aged care, or with National Disability Insurance Scheme providers, which are considered areas crucial to the pandemic's frontline response. In Aotearoa-New Zealand, visa restrictions were similarly relaxed for students to work over 20 hours a week in supermarkets during Alert Levels 3 or 4, on the same grounds.²⁷ Both governments have therefore accommodated international students' need for work in line with areas of national necessity.

Racialised precarity

International student workers' everyday experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic are conditioned by both their temporary immigration status, and their racialisation. MWJI's survey of 6,000 Australian international students reveals that many have lost their jobs due to social distancing measures, and are unable to meet their basic living expenses.²⁸ The researchers predict these students will remain vulnerable to labour exploitation due to their precarious financial status and desperation for work in a more tightly constrained labour market.²⁹ The UTS report further reveals that 61% of those international student respondents who were working before March have since lost their jobs, and a third of the study's respondents admitted to going without necessities like food in order to make rent.³⁰

²³ Chew, Jonathan. 2020. COVID-19 is changing the fortunes of international education destinations – Part 1. *Navitas Insights*. 16 July 2020. Available online at: <https://insights.navitas.com/covid-19-is-changing-the-fortunes-of-international-education-destinations-part-1/>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

²⁴ Unions NSW. 2020. *Survey Results*, August. Sydney: Unions NSW.

²⁵ Kamil, Yasmin Ahmad. 2020. How is the pandemic affecting international students in New Zealand?. *Study International News*. 26 August 2020. Available online at: <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/university-student-in-auckland/>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

²⁶ New Zealand Education. 2020. The coronavirus: what you need to know. Available online at: <https://naumainz.studyinnewzealand.govt.nz/help-and-advice/healthcare/the-coronavirus-what-you-need-to-know/>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

²⁷ New Zealand Immigration. 2020. Student visa COVID-19 information. Available online at: <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/covid-19/covid-19-information-for-student-visa-holders>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

²⁸ Farbenblum and Berg. 2020.

²⁹ Farbenblum and Berg. 2020.

³⁰ Morris et al. 2020.

According to the results of the MWJI survey, in the last year, international students have reported issues such as underpayment, receiving their wages in cash, not receiving a payslip, not receiving any payment for a period, being forced to pay wages back in cash, sexual harassment, accidents, injuries, being required to work long hours, and termination of employment after making complaints.³¹ Several students did not feel that they could report these incidents to the police, given their temporary immigration status.³² Many of these issues were compounded by experiences of racism or xenophobia: underpayment was reported by a greater proportion of those who self-reported that they spoke poor or fair English, while MWJI notes that Chinese students fared “far worse” than others, and were severely underpaid.³³ Although similar research has not surfaced in Aotearoa-New Zealand, the country has witnessed multiple incidents of racialised violence and discrimination against persons of East Asian descent during the pandemic.³⁴ It is therefore possible that racialised students working during the pandemic have faced similarly trying circumstances.

Future student mobilities to the region

Migrant workers’ experiences in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during COVID-19, as well as their political leaderships’ management of the pandemic, may have continuing impacts for future student mobilities to the region. International students living in Australia during the pandemic told MWJI they are “unimpressed” at Australia’s response to them and would not recommend Australia as a destination for study.³⁵ A survey of international education agents conducted by Navitas Insights in May finds that Aotearoa-New Zealand’s management of the COVID-19 pandemic has made it the world’s most attractive study destination for international students.³⁶ Still, despite Australia’s comparatively weaker policy stance towards international students, the survey finds that the country is still the second-most attractive destination.³⁷

³¹ Farbenblum and Berg. 2020.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Foon, Meng. 2020. Meng Foon: Covid 19 coronavirus fear no excuse for racism. *New Zealand Herald*, 1 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/meng-foon-covid-19-coronavirus-fear-no-excuse-for-racism/BBSDTKL3IQ7RWSADZDBOQANEL4/>. Last accessed 22 December 2020; Leahy, Ben. 2020. Coronavirus outbreak: Calm urged as anti-Chinese sentiment felt in New Zealand. *New Zealand Herald*. 31 January 2020. Available online at: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12304816. Last accessed 22 December 2020; Peters, Tom. 2020. New Zealand Sees Increase In Racist Anti-Chinese Attacks. *Scoop*. 12 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL2005/S00092/new-zealand-sees-increase-in-racist-anti-chinese-attacks.htm>. Last accessed 13 January 2021.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Chew. 2020.

³⁷ Ibid.