# International students face mental health and housing challenges in Australia



When Samreen Tanveer left Dhaka, Bangladesh, for Sydney to pursue her studies at the University of New South Wales, she encountered challenges that extended beyond academics. Adjusting to a new country meant grappling with unfamiliar people, surroundings, and the absence of her support network of family and friends. Speaking to ABC Radio National's Life Matters, Ms Tanveer described the experience as “a whole new country ... a whole new experience.” One of her biggest hurdles was overcoming homesickness, especially without the usual support system she had grown accustomed to back home.

Similarly, Koushik Mukherjee, who arrived in Melbourne from India at the end of 2021 to commence his Bachelor of Business studies, highlighted the mental stresses linked to job insecurity, loneliness, and the housing crisis. “The lack of job security, along with loneliness, do contribute towards that extra bit of mental stress. And right now you can also add the housing crisis in there,” he said. Both students echoed the difficulties of navigating the Australian rental market, a challenge exacerbated by the country's ongoing housing crisis which political parties have sought to address by proposing caps on international student numbers to curb migration rates to pre-pandemic levels.

Despite these political measures, research shows a more complex picture. A recent study found no direct correlation between the number of international students and rising rental costs, yet the political discourse continues to cause uncertainty for international students. Additionally, a 2023 study published in the Journal of Mental Health revealed that international students face higher levels of anxiety compared to domestic students, often compounded by discrimination, racism, and abuse. Female international students in particular reported significantly higher instances of physical or verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and social exclusion.

The mental health challenges of international students are further intensified by difficulties adjusting to life in Australia, including language barriers, culture shock, social isolation, and loneliness. Cases of psychological stress and self-harm have also been documented. Ms Tanveer’s personal experience with homesickness underscores the emotional toll many students face during their transition.

The scale of international education in Australia is substantial. In 2023, there were over one million international student enrolments, marking a new milestone. Australia holds the second highest global share of international students, and the education sector stands as the nation’s fourth largest industry, generating an estimated $51 billion for the economy in 2023-24. However, a report led by Professor Gaby Ramia of the University of Sydney highlighted critical gaps in mental health support for these students. Triggered by a 2021 coroner’s report identifying 47 suicides among international students in Victoria between 2009 and 2019, the report emphasised the inadequate protection and welfare support available to this group.

Professor Ramia told ABC Radio National’s Breakfast program in July 2024 that international students face “legal neglect by governments on both sides of politics” and that existing codes of practice guiding educational institutions’ treatment of international students are largely recommendatory rather than mandatory. He pointed to issues such as precarious employment, exploitative housing conditions, financial insecurity, food poverty, racism, discrimination, and lack of access to social security protections, which became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jo Cassidy, associate director of RMIT University’s student wellbeing hub in Melbourne, corroborated these concerns. With international students making up 24 per cent of total enrolments at RMIT in 2024, her team frequently encounters students dealing with homesickness, feelings of exclusion, and challenges navigating unfamiliar systems such as banking and employment. Ms Cassidy also noted the impact of international events on students with families abroad, sharing Ms Tanveer’s experience during the 2023 protests in Bangladesh that caused communication blackouts and curfews in her home country. Additionally, racism and the increasing cost of living, including rising rent, remain pressing issues, which the university addresses through support services and hardship assistance funds.

Addressing these complex issues, Professor Ramia advocates for a collaborative approach, urging universities to partner with mental health organisations and allied services to provide more comprehensive support, particularly in areas of housing, financial insecurity, and general wellbeing. “What we’re recommending … is for universities to come together with other organisations that provide services in terms of mental health, but also allied services [to assist with] housing, broader health and, in particular, financial insecurity,” he said.

Despite the challenges, many international students demonstrate resilience and personal growth. Ms Tanveer reflects on her journey positively, stating, “Looking back, I’ve grown a lot since arriving. I’ve learned to navigate new environments, take on new responsibilities and adapt to different situations, which has strengthened my character and shaped me into a better version of myself.” Likewise, Mr Mukherjee acknowledges homesickness but appreciates the diversity and welcoming nature of Melbourne and his university, RMIT, where he was an AFR Top 100 Future Leaders Awards finalist earlier this year. “I miss [home] … but I feel like Melbourne [and] RMIT has been so welcoming and [it’s] such a diverse place,” he said.

The ongoing conversations about international student wellbeing, housing, and integration continue to shape the broader discourse in Australia’s education and political sectors. The experiences of students like Ms Tanveer and Mr Mukherjee highlight both the challenges and opportunities of studying abroad in a complex, evolving landscape.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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6. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383180494_Mental_health_and_wellbeing_of_international_students_in_Australia_a_systematic_review> - This study discusses the mental health challenges faced by international students in Australia, including social isolation, financial stress, and discrimination, supporting the experiences of Ms. Tanveer and Mr. Mukherjee.
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