GUIDE FOR SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WITH CRISIS NAVIGATION

Overview

This guide has been developed as part of the Best Practice International Student Engagement project, funded by the Australian Government through the International Education Innovation Fund (IEIF). The core aim of this project is to develop a series of guides and resources to enhance international student engagement.

The evidence-based guides and resources have been developed through:

- Desktop analysis of existing literature and examples of innovative practice.

- Three surveys, capturing over 6,000 responses from international students, graduates, education providers, government, community and professional organisations.

- 11 consultation workshops with 213 stakeholders.

- Interviews with 40 key stakeholders.

This research has identified the key themes involved in international student engagement and examples of innovative practice.

This guide is part of a series of six guides and a Guiding Framework intended to improve policies, practices, and programs to enhance international student engagement.

A complete list of the guides is below:

- Guide for enhancing international student engagement through teaching, learning and language

- Guide for enhancing international students' intercultural and community engagement

- Guide for enhancing international students' mental health and wellbeing

- Guide for enhancing international student engagement in work integrated learning and their employability

- Guide for supporting international students with accommodation

- Guide for supporting international students with crisis navigation

- A framework for developing innovative programs to enhance international student engagement.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

This guide is designed to assist practitioners and staff working for education providers and organisations who are involved in supporting international students through a crisis or critical incident.

International students are vulnerable to crises whether they occur in Australia or overseas. Crises or critical incidents can occur anytime throughout an international student's education journey. Crises that impact international students may include:

- an event impacting a community, either in Australia or overseas. This could be natural disasters, pandemics, acts of terrorism, wars, cyber-attacks, or racist attacks on people from a particular background.
- an event or series of events impacting a student personally, such as homelessness, mental health incidents, serious accidents, being a victim of crime or exploitation, the death or illness of a family member or a close friend.

International students do not generally have the same support networks as domestic students. Many international students struggle to seek support as they do not know where to go or how to seek help. Their temporary residency status often makes them ineligible to access the support and financial assistance that is available to Australian citizens and permanent residents.

International students can therefore be more vulnerable to experiencing immediate distress and ongoing stress or trauma if they do not receive the necessary support.

The negative effects of a critical incident experienced by an international student can be compounded if there is a lack of coordinated and comprehensive support provided by education providers and related organisations.

Caring for international students and enhancing their readiness to cope with critical incidents are crucial factors in minimising the disruptions they may experience.

This guide provides guiding principles and specific strategies to support international students as they navigate a crisis.

The guide builds on research findings from desktop analysis, consultation workshops, surveys and interviews with international students, graduates, education provider staff, government, community and professional organisations.

What do we know?

Education providers and community organisations play an important role in supporting international students through a crisis.

The *National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018*[1] requires education providers to:

- have a documented policy and process for managing critical incidents that could affect the international student's ability to undertake or complete a course, such as, but not limited to, incidents that may cause physical or psychological harm.

- maintain a written record of any critical incident and remedial action taken by the registered provider for at least two years after the international student ceases to be an enrolled student.

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1   National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018. Australian Government Department of Education.

What helps international students during a crisis?

■ **Preparing international students for unexpected crisis situations**

It is important to prepare international students for crises. This includes ensuring they know where and how they can get support.

■ **Peer support from other international students**

International students are more likely to seek help and information from fellow international students about the support available to them and what they should do in a crisis. Providing forums for international students affected by a crisis to communicate, helps to foster engagement with their peers.

■ **Trust in service provision**

International students are more likely to access services they have contacted before and have received satisfactory support from. Services with a proven track record are more likely to be trusted by international students and then recommended to their peers.

■ **Accurate and up-to-date resources for communication**

International students need reliable and up-to-date information to make informed decisions about the support that is available to them during a crisis. This could include web pages, portals, and media channels such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, WeChat and Snapchat to ensure international students get access to the timely information they need.

Study Australia, Study NSW, Study Melbourne, Study Queensland and StudyPerth created a dedicated information page on their websites featuring support services available to international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This could be used as a template for any future crisis affecting international students.

■ **Professional development**

It is important that support staff, especially those who are new to their role, can understand and empathise with international students' needs during crises.

■ **Education providers**

Institutions are a key contact for international students, and they are required to provide support to international students during critical incidents. They should have a comprehensive and rapid crisis response mechanism in place to support international students. It is also important to involve diverse stakeholders, including governments and community organisations, when handling critical incidents affecting international students.

3

What hinders international students during a crisis?

■ **Multiple sources of stress**

During a crisis, international students can experience a range of negative impacts, such as heightened financial stress, housing unaffordability, isolation, and stresses affecting their mental health. These add to other existing challenges international students experience while being away from their home country, family and support networks.

■ **Discrimination and racism**

Discrimination and racism towards international students exists and can become more intense during a crisis. For example, in major destination countries, international students of Asian backgrounds suffered from increased racial hatred, xenophobia and violence throughout COVID-19[2].

■ **Conflicting information leading to confusion**

For a range of reasons, including political tensions between Australia and international students' home countries, international students may receive negative and conflicting sources of information which can lead them to be confused and uncertain.

■ **Barriers to dealing with crises**

International students can face financial constraints. For example, they may be unable to pay for specialised support services, preventative measures, and/or damage caused by crises and disasters. Their visa status may limit their eligibility for government or community support programs.

As international students are unfamiliar with Australian systems, they may feel overwhelmed and hesitant to seek help. This can make navigating challenging situations and traumatic events even more difficult.

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2 Yang, S. (2021). COVID-19 exacerbates existing racial hatred experienced by Australian Asian communities, report finds. ABC News.

Language barriers and cultural differences

When international students are in a crisis, it is challenging to process information. When the information available is only presented in English, understanding the situation and identifying how to get help can be even more difficult. Providing international students with information about available support services in their native languages is especially important during crises.

Lack of support networks

International students living in a new country are far away from their normal support networks, family and friends. Therefore, they may feel isolated, and struggle during difficult situations.

Lack of institutional preparedness

Education providers may not be prepared for a crisis which arises suddenly, and requires immediate action. Support services provided by stakeholders across the sector during crises are often ad hoc and short-term, and can vary among education providers. The coordination of multiple stakeholders within and outside the institution is critical.

5

What can we do?

Guiding Principles

Programs and initiatives supporting international students during a crisis should be centred around the following principles. These principles are based on the findings of surveys, interviews and consultation workshops. They include:

1. Improving communication

2. Assisting international students to seek help

3. Implementing a targeted response to a crisis

4. Coordinated support

5. Tailored support

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 1:

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Improving communication

Crises are particularly stressful for international students, so it is important that they receive timely, reliable and accurate information. They typically seek information from a wide range of sources, but often prefer to access information in their own language.

Education providers and organisations could employ the following strategies when communicating information to international students during a crisis:

■ **Providing accurate and up-to-date information**

It is critical that international students are provided with accurate and up-to-date information to help them navigate a crisis. Students are more likely to trust sources and services recommended by their education provider.

Education providers and organisations could consider the following steps:

● providing accurate and up-to-date information about the crisis.

● developing a plan to sequence information, including information that can be readily digested in the first instance and information that would be more easily understood when provided later.

● compiling a list of key contacts both within the institution and locally, and available support services and resources.

● ensuring that the education provider's website gives links to available services, including mental health and crisis support.

● providing a resource detailing the emergency relief assistance available to international students.

● where possible, translating this information into a number of languages.

City of Melbourne has a dedicated web page providing international students with up-to-date information about the services available to them both during a crisis and in normal times: What's on for international students.

■ **Connecting with government**

Education providers should contact relevant government services in the event of a crisis to establish the facts, understand the official response, and identify any support being implemented.

■ **Using varied communication channels to direct students to reliable sources of information**

Everyone responds to crises differently. Students rely on various sources of information, so, where possible, it is important to direct them to reliable sources.

Face-to-face engagement can be effective when engaging international students, especially during a crisis. However, social media, emails and direct text messages are generally their preferred channels of communication and can complement face-to-face communication since it allows them time to read, translate and digest the information provided.

For example, the City of Melbourne directed international students to reliable sources of information during a crisis via emails, their Facebook page and their web page.

■ **Establishing an online engagement group**

During a crisis, some international students may feel more comfortable turning to online engagement groups and socialising with their peers when seeking support.

Education providers could consider establishing these online engagement groups in support of international students during a crisis. However, these groups need to be actively monitored to ensure the accuracy and consistency of information and protection of privacy.

Examples of virtual engagement groups include online discussion forums via Facebook, WhatsApp or WeChat.

■ **Providing information in different languages**

Information about how to access support services during a crisis is often only provided in English. When international students are experiencing a crisis, it is harder for them to engage using a second language. In addition, some crisis navigation documents are not provided in plain English, which makes it more difficult to understand.

Education providers should ensure that information is written in plain English and, where possible, translated into several other languages. This could be done in collaboration with local ethnic community groups and related stakeholders.

For example, the Embrace Multicultural Mental Health website provides a fact sheet on trauma and a series of translated resources on mental health, which are helpful for international students during a crisis. The website assists Australian multicultural communities to access information, resources, and services in multiple languages, and it is provided in a culturally-appropriate format.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 2:

ASSISTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO SEEK HELP

Assisting international students to seek help

International students are often reluctant to ask for help and in many cases may not know how or where to access the support they need. Education providers must ensure students can easily request support and feel safe and comfortable when doing so.

The following strategies may assist international students to seek help:

■ **Removing fear**

Fear is a factor that affects international student wellbeing during a crisis.

Education providers can develop strategies to alleviate the fears and anxieties international students may experience.

For example, this could be done through the provision of up-to-date facts and information about crises, regular check-ins and counselling sessions for students who are experiencing a crisis.

■ **Normalising requests for help**

International students should be assured that it is normal to seek help in a crisis. Students can sometimes feel ashamed when seeking help.

Education providers can connect international students with other students to share their needs and experiences when seeking help.

This could be done through buddy or mentor programs. Education providers can also consider running leadership programs which train students to connect with diverse student bodies. These mentors could be invaluable allies when working with their institutions and student associations to support their international student peers during a crisis.

Making key staff and contact points known to international students

Under the National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018, registered providers must designate at least one staff member as the official point of contact for international students. This contact officer must have access to up-to-date information on the registered provider's support services.

International students may be afraid of seeking help or reporting problems to their institution or other authorities, as they may think it could affect their visa status. Building a good relationship with international students is important as they are more likely to seek help from staff or organisations they trust.

Ideally, education providers should have a regular contact person that students can become familiar with and trust. In-person engagement between support staff and students is critical.

Education providers and other stakeholders may consider providing an after-hours service as critical incidents can occur at any time. While there is no obligation to do so under the National Code, such a service can be highly beneficial in a crisis.

International students should also be supported and encouraged to report incidents to the local police, and seek their help. Students should be assured that reporting an incident will not affect their visa status.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 3:

IMPLEMENTING A TARGETED RESPONSE TO A CRISIS

Implementing a targeted response to a crisis

Being in a different country and away from family, friends and existing support networks during a crisis can be challenging. Education providers must play a key role in supporting their students and this can be made more effective by working collaboratively with other stakeholders - this could include various levels of government and local community organisations.

Education providers and stakeholders could adopt the following strategies to develop a targeted approach to supporting international students during a crisis:

■ **Allocating a case manager to help students navigate a critical incident**

Navigating a crisis can be very complex. It is important to understand the needs of international students and the support available. A dedicated case manager can guide students through these complexities, making sure they access the support they need and helping them understand institutional processes and possible impacts on their student visa.

Where there are gaps in support, education providers could:

- decide what support can be leveraged through on-campus services.

- identify what additional support is needed and how to access this.

- advocate on behalf of international students.

- partner with community organisations to ensure that international student needs are catered for.

For example, services including Food Bank, COVID-19 Disaster Payment, COVID Test Support Payments, Red Cross and the financial assistance given by education providers and government (e.g., tuition fee discounts) helped international students greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

■ **Quickly engaging and supporting students impacted by a crisis**

Providing timely support minimises the impact of a crisis on students. Education providers and other organisations involved in supporting international students need to engage impacted international students as soon as possible to identify what support is needed.

The two examples below demonstrate how an education provider and a community organisation acted quickly to identify international students needing support.

Swinburne University adopted a "cohort outreach" approach to manage critical incidents. For example, during the 2021 earthquake in Indonesia, they immediately collected data on the nationality of students so they could identify who was affected by the disaster and communicate directly with them.

The Sydney Community Forum (SCF), during the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, contacted all students who were identified as coming from Ukraine or Russia, or who had listed these countries in their student profile. SCF then spoke to these students about support services available to them if they were worried about family or had other concerns. They then followed up with those who needed support.

■ **Providing a safe and supportive environment**

Under the National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018, registered providers must take all reasonable steps to provide a safe environment on campus and advise overseas students and staff of actions they can take to enhance their personal security and safety.

Education providers are required to have clear policies to address issues associated with racist or sexist behaviours including sexual harassment. They should reassure students that they will be protected if they report abuse, and that these issues will be taken seriously.

Education providers should ensure that all students and staff are aware that the institution is a safe environment, where racist behaviour and sexual harassment is not tolerated.

Education providers should develop and maintain an understanding of the effects of trauma, how intersectionality affects experiences of violence, and procedural fairness so that staff and students can respond effectively to disclosures of gender-based violence and other instances of harm and abuse.

■ **Facilitating connections between students**

International students usually turn to their peers to share their experiences and to seek support.

Education providers should facilitate this by connecting international students with their fellow international and domestic students so they can share experiences and help each other.

For example, during COVID-19, The University of Melbourne created an online breakout room for international students (both onshore and offshore) and domestic students to share their experiences.

■ **Equipping students with skills so they are prepared to manage a crisis**

International students should be equipped with skills to handle difficult situations.

For example, stakeholder consultations suggest these skills include, but are not limited to, protecting privacy, telling their stories, and seeking support when difficulties arise. Education providers can consider offering workshops on developing these skills.

16

Good practice example:

Foodbank Victoria International Student Pop-Up Store

Foodbank Victoria's International Student Pop-Up Store was launched in response to COVID-19 lockdowns. The store opened in October 2020, and ran for 14 months until December 2021. The program was funded by, and delivered in partnership with, the Victorian Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions and Study Melbourne. The store had 66,419 international student visits from 134 different nationalities in the heart of Melbourne's CBD.

International students who remained in Australia during 2020 and 2021 were not able to access the JobKeeper and JobSeeker federal government support programs. After April 2020, they were also unable to return home until the borders reopened. With 68.3 per cent losing employment within industries shut down by COVID-19 restrictions, this put many international students in a very precarious situation. A significant proportion of international students experienced critical food insecurity during this time because they did not have enough money to buy food, while also being socially isolated.

The Central Pop-Up Store location allowed students from 294 learning institutions across Greater Melbourne to access free, culturally-appropriate, fresh, staple foods in an environment of self-determination and dignity. The store offered ready-to-eat meals and thirty key staples including pasta, rice, milk, coconut milk, sauces, instant noodles and legumes, plus a variety of fresh, chilled and frozen produce. A continual improvement approach used feedback from the international students to ensure food aligned with the requirements of the cohort.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 4:

COORDINATED SUPPORT

Coordinated support

To maximise the reach of support services, education providers could consider partnering with each other and with external organisations to help international students during a crisis

They should use the following strategies:

■ **Adopting a holistic approach that brings internal and external support together**

A holistic and coordinated approach helps reduce the confusion and complexity of the information international students receive.

Education providers could provide a consolidated list of emergency relief services available from all levels of government, community and charity organisations, such as the Salvation Army, Food Bank, State Accommodation Grant, Rental Relief Grant and Red Cross. Education providers could consider appointing a staff member to act as the coordinator between the campus and the community.

For example, Southern Cross University created a guide to available COVID-19 support for students in regional areas, including food relief, accommodation help, and crisis support.

■ **Proactively engaging and collaborating with external organisations who provide services to temporary residents, refugees and new arrivals**

In some cases, international students are more trusting of independent community and charity organisations since they may feel that sharing their problems with these organisations is unlikely to affect their visa status or their record with their education provider.

Stakeholder consultations suggest that education providers could introduce international students to organisations, such as Australian Red Cross or a migrant support service.

19

Good practice example:

The Couch International Student Centre

The Couch International Student Centre (the Couch) is an initiative of the Salvation Army Melbourne Project 614 and the City of Melbourne. The purpose of this initiative is to create a safe place for international students which facilitates connection with each other and support services. The Couch is located in the centre of Melbourne on Bourke Street. The Couch is open Mondays to Thursdays, from 6.00pm to 8.30pm.

The concept of the Couch started in 2009 when the Salvation Army was concerned about the welfare of international students as there had been violent attacks on some of them in Melbourne. They also wanted to provide support to international students who may have been exploited by migration agents.

The program was revived during the COVID-19 lockdowns in collaboration with the City of Melbourne to support international students. Other stakeholders involved in the Couch included Victoria Police, United Voice, the Fair Work Commission and community health nurses from the Victorian Government Community Health Program.

The Couch has continued to welcome new students, ensuring that all international students in Melbourne have a safe place where they feel they belong.

The aims of the program are to provide international students with:

- access to hot, nutritious meals.

- opportunities for socialisation and cultural exchange that help address isolation and loneliness.

- connection with support services.

- information on a range of issues, including housing, employment, counselling, student services, legal support and representation.

The Couch model has been replicated in Geelong as the International Student Lounge (the Lounge). Study Melbourne funded the Lounge in Geelong to support international students in regional Victoria to connect with other international students and enhance their experience in Victoria. In particular, the Lounge has been designed to address the needs of international students in Geelong.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 5:

TAILORED SUPPORT

Tailored support

International students have their own individual problems, needs for support, and abilities when seeking assistance.

Education providers and concerned organisations need to consider each individual student's situation and tailor their policies and procedures to meet their specific needs, and not expect a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to be effective.

The following strategies have been identified as effective in providing tailored support to international students:

■ **Understanding the context of each international student's situation**

Being aware of individual students' issues, such as their visa status, financial constraints, mental health, and language difficulties, is crucial in building trust during a crisis.

Stakeholder consultation workshops suggest that when giving support to international students, education providers and organisations should fully understand the situation and the implications for the individual international student when helping them to select appropriate support services.

■ **Connecting international students to support networks who speak their native language**

International students are more likely to feel comfortable seeking help from support networks who speak their language. These are likely to have a better understanding of the situation the students are going through and to give students a sense of connection and belonging while they are in Australia.

Education providers and organisations could connect international students with multi-lingual social workers, or communities from the international students' home countries.

For example, Sydney Community Forum social workers are former international students whose background gives them the lived experience to empathise and build trust with the international students they support.

- **Understanding cross-border needs and intercultural dynamics**

  It is important that staff working with international students possess a basic understanding of international students' particular needs. Understanding the cultural norms that international learners bring with them, and how these may impede their uptake of support services, is crucial.

  Professional development for staff working with international students should consider context and cultural factors that may inhibit international students seeking help in a crisis. Knowledge about the unique cross-border challenges international students face should also be considered in developing an interculturally appropriate and tailored crisis response program.

- **Using a strength-based approach to provide support to international students**

  Students living through a crisis are likely to feel stressed, isolated, lost and potentially traumatised. However, they are more likely to overcome their problems if they focus on their strengths and the positive aspects of their lives.

  When providing support to international students, education providers and organisations should help students to feel positive about themselves.

Introduction

Improving Communication

Assisting students

Targeted response

Coordinated support

Tailored support

Reflection

Good practice example:

Cohort Outreach at Swinburne University of Technology

Many aspects of an international student's life can be negatively affected by events in their home country. These could have an impact on their mental health, finances, decision making and studies.

Under Swinburne's critical incident management obligations, a supplementary process of their Cohort Outreach program is to be implemented as a risk management response to students' home country issues.

The Cohort Outreach initiative seeks to support students to manage and cope with their acute response to such crises, including advice on support services, and to provide a reminder of obligations under their student visa.

Immediately following an incident, an outreach email is sent to the identified cohort to express the university's concerns and identify any directly affected students. Immediate assistance is provided to those with an urgent need to return home.

Depending on student responses, the university calls students to talk about the issues. This allows students to voice their fears and identifies those who might be more deeply affected so they can be directed to more targeted support. On some occasions, the meetings unite concerned students to form a proactive initiative, such as fund raising for their home country, as was the case during past Nepalese floods.

These meetings are also shared with other internal teams, such as Counselling and Multi-Faith. Positive feedback from students includes gratitude for the opportunity to share their concerns, and to realise they are not alone. Students also stated that this made them feel the university cared about them during the crisis.

Swinburne maintains ongoing contact with students who experience trauma, and especially those who are uncomfortable requesting continuing support.

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY

Re-examine your crisis response program or critical incident policy, and consider the following questions with your colleagues:

- What factors should we consider when developing our crisis management policy and/or programs to support international students?

- What are the ways in which we could more effectively incorporate international students' unique cross-border experiences into the design and implementation of a tailored crisis response program?

- How can we leverage peer support, informal channels, and social media to optimise assistance for international students during a crisis while avoiding risks such as misrepresentation of information?

- How can we involve international students in the co-creation and implementation of their local crisis response or risk-reduction program and associated activities?

- What approaches can we use to establish and sustain strategic partnerships with local communities, professional organisations and other stakeholders to provide more effective coordinated support to international students during crises?

- What are effective communication approaches to provide accurate and up-to-date information to international students during crises?

Resources

Examples of programs and resources supporting international students during a crisis include:

- For personal crisis and mental health support services, international students can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14; Beyond Blue on 1800 512 348 or Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800 providing generalist crisis counselling, information and referral services for young people aged 5 to 25.

- 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 is a national sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling help line providing 24-hour services for anyone who has experienced or is at risk of experiencing physical or sexual violence.

- Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467 provides telephone, video and online counselling to people 15 years and older who are affected by suicide.

- Organisations such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army can provide support during a crisis, and provided support for international students during COVID-19.

- Community organisation programs like Oz International Student Hub, led and organised by international students, can connect international students with appropriate support during a crisis.

- More resources and programs supporting international students during a crisis are available via the Virtual Map. The Virtual Map is available at www.isengagement.org/virtual-map.