

# Some light on a dark topic: International students' mental health

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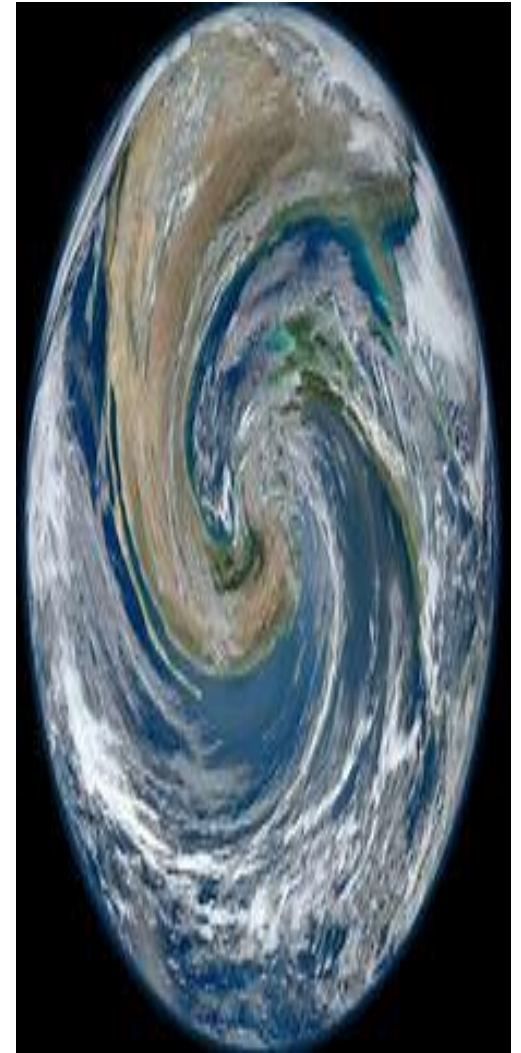
- Uni staff in Australia
- Uni staff and international students in Australia, UK and US
- Singaporean uni students in Australia

- 16 in-depth interviews with university staff who raised the issue of mental health in a larger study
- 12 female, 4 male – reflecting the gendered support service
- Findings – three main themes
  - An increase in mental health problems
  - Stress and strain
  - Facilitating the transition of international students

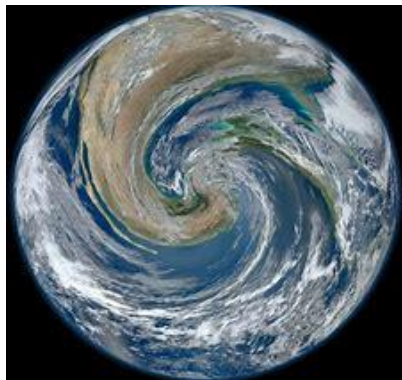


- Participants reported a significant increase in the number of and severity of cases for both international and local students
- Problem exacerbated for international students
- “we are dealing with people with more severe problems”
- Mental health problems broadly defined, including emotional and stress problems as well as serious psychiatric conditions
- Increase in suicidal presentations

- When I first started here...we probably had 40% what we'd term emotional relationship problems and 60% study. Now it's about 80% emotional relationship issues and 20% of what we call learning type problems...
- Twenty years ago you may see five or six real severe psychiatric difficulties per counsellor. Now they're seeing five or six a week and suicidal ideation.
- (Director of Health Services)

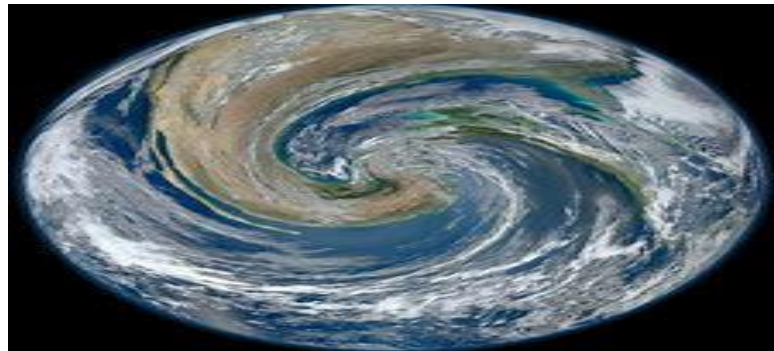


- A possible explanation:
- They live in a more rapidly changing and unstable personal and social environment and are confronted by much more information about more and graver problems...at a much earlier age than previous generations (Eckersley, 2008, p. 12).



- All participants spoke about the adjustment and stresses associated with transitioning to life in Australia
- “it suddenly seems like a great big frightening world out there”
- The academic environment: if students struggle with English “everything else suffers”
- “We’ve had a couple of students who failed when I was first here, and their parents had no idea...They were suicidal at the thought of having to tell them...and face the shame”

- Off-campus living: many come from “very restrictive backgrounds”
- “We have a big problem with the international students working basically too hard and not getting enough sleep...we often get people that are in a state of collapse, they’ve only slept three or four hours for the last three weeks...they often have to work long hours just to make ends meet”





- Seeking help for mental health problems: “a real taboo”
  - Delayed seeking help until the point of “disaster”
  - Word of mouth increased chances of seeking help (ie if friend had had a positive experience)
  - “They’re willing to accept a medical issue but a psychological issue is harder for them to accept”
- But this is changing!



- Integration and prevention: “a greater sense of belonging”
- Erosion of routines and on-campus activities such as “the common lunch hour”
- “More students have part-time jobs to support themselves, so they come to uni to go to their classes and they don’t stick around, whereas, in the old days you’d go to some interesting thing at lunchtime...there’s a lot less of that...and more coming to uni as a consumer.... The social and communal aspects have sort of diminished, and I think those are quite critical to international students being able to survive”.

- A clearer understanding needed of the Australian health care system
- “They’re often given some false information: provided you’ve got your health cover, everything will be free. But it only pays medical costs like Medicare does, so with private consultations there’s often a big gap.”
- “Medical services can be so different. We hear some strange stories from patients and we don’t really know exactly what’s happened. They often don’t know the names of their medication.”

- 150 in-depth interviews with staff and international students in Australia, UK and US
- Mental health issues: A subject that people want to avoid
  - “Stress, tension, being away from home, being away from support, not feeling part of the community. I think it’s much easier to perpetrate a crime against someone if you don’t feel part of the community. You feel alienated, you feel distanced, and things aren’t working out. So mental health issues I think are a critical matter as well. We’ve had a number of students that have presented with mental health issues that have needed to be dealt with, and they are very tricky to deal with”. (Teaching Fellow, Australia)

- “Psychologically, you’re always the burden because you can’t really open up to anyone . . . so I think it gets really difficult and at some point you just break down . . . or you resort to other measures, like you get into a fight on the street or start creating trouble, or try to get some easy money” (Indian international student from America, Australia)



- “Some are coming from cultures where they haven’t really had to do all that much as an individual ... 17, 18, 19 is very young, and they’re here for the first time without someone doing something for them, and without a mentor, and at a stage of their life where they’re hormonally challenged. They’re challenged in many ways. And I think that can be very dangerous for mental health . . .that can cause a lot of distress within students which could lead them to then dealing with it in non-traditional ways like getting into activities like . . . spending all their time at the casino or getting into drug abuse to deal with it” (Students Rights Officer, Australia)

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- “They’re not wanted at home, frankly. They’ve actually often been to another overseas university. . . . It is a marker of high risk if we are the second or third international university in a person’s history, particularly as Undergraduate but Postgraduate too. . . . It’s very common . . . they are often not well. Some of the biggest problems we have are perpetrators who are mentally quite unwell and would’ve been when they got here. They don’t disclose their ill health in order to make sure they can still come”. (University Security, Australia)

- Gan and Forbes-Mewett (2018)
- 10 Singaporean students in Melbourne
- In-depth interviews
- Focus on specific group provided new insights





- **Mental health** commonly viewed by the Singaporean students as “general well-being”
- “The basic level that you can sustain yourself”
- “an aspect of health that everyone has”
- **Mental illness** commonly described as “not something you can see”
- “clinically proven”
- “unsound mind”
- “impairments”
- **The term “mental health” viewed more positively**

- “I think a lot of the times, the ideas we get of mental health are from dramas when we watch television and they start showing this person who’s really crazy or really sad and they want to commit suicide ... When you expose the kids who are very impressionistic to all things then we will automatically form a perception of it” (Keith)



- “Normally you don’t see the problem, only on TV and stuff. Sometimes you think that they are exaggerating the issue. But when you actually see it, you realize how easy it is to actually become depressed” (Lauren)



- Commenting on two “stellar” student friends:
- “To me, it’s not like people who suffer from mental illnesses are weak or any way inferior that they are subjected to like these mood swings or whatever. Seriously, it can happen to the best of us and I suppose the interaction with these two people who are so stellar in their academics and everything. It made me realise that it affects everyone”. (Tiffany)

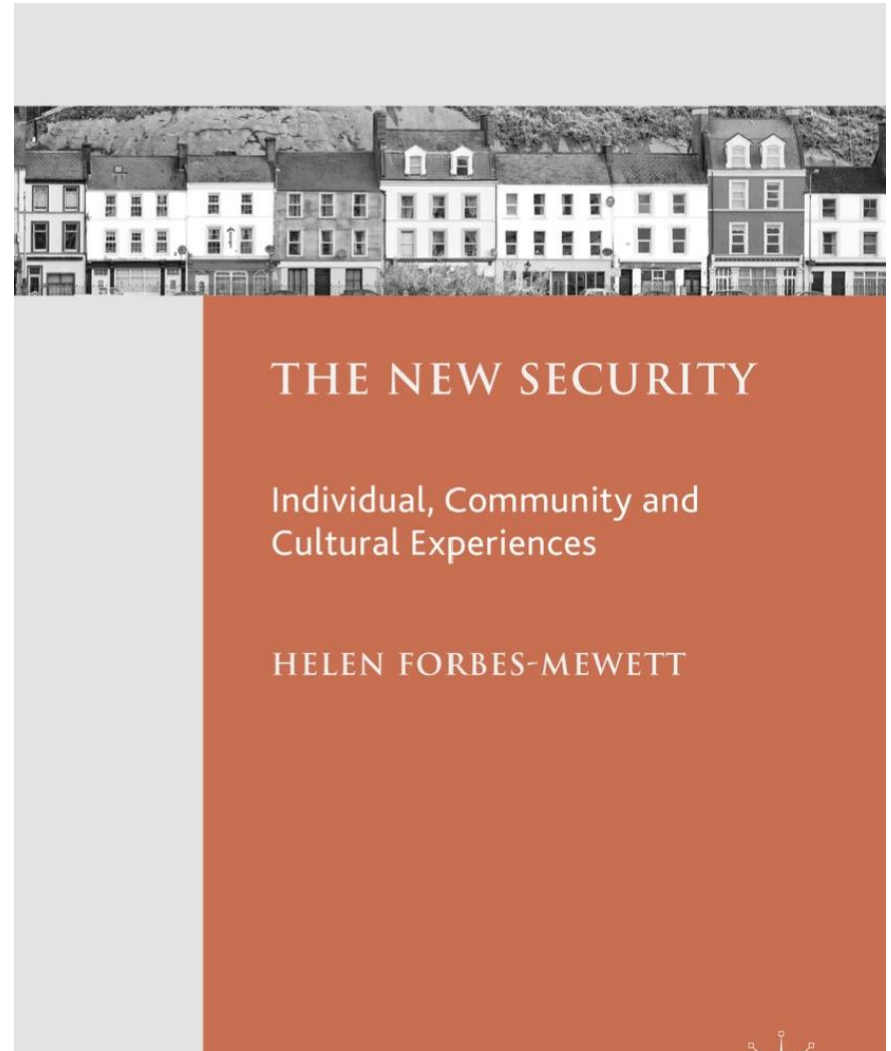


- “In Asian culture, what is a mental problem? It’s a very Western thing, like how are you feeling, your mental well-being, it is non-existent. Especially in the older generations, they don’t care. For young Singaporeans, we are more open-minded, but we are kind of stuck in between the generation changings. We still have Asian roots but we are more educated and aware of these sorts of things like mental health and stuff. So I think its transitioning for us. We are in that awkward in-between zone”. (Tiffany)



- Mental health problems are commonly experienced by many individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds
- The notion of mental health is applied broadly and its commonality is increasing in the university setting
- Normalising mental health calls for culturally diverse responses from university support systems
- Studies focusing on specific groups will shed more light on the subject

- 4 chapters on international students
- 2 on campus security
- International student housing
- International students and food security
- <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137591012>



*Thank you*

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