

Fluid Security in the Asia Pacific

The experiences of international students in Australia

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Background

Contemporary migration is increasingly characterised by multiple movements and circularity rather than one-way mobility. New migration patterns are increasingly fluid and unpredictable, south–south, north–south as well as south–north. Such changes emerge from a variety of factors including less permanent work; increasingly transnational family, friendship and wider social and political networks and therefore opportunities and capacities for new forms of mobility; and the demand for a highly mobile, yet dispensable workforce in neoliberal, globally connected economies. Aligned with neoliberal values, states increasingly devolve responsibilities to individuals with the result that wellbeing and life outcomes have become disconnected from broader socio-political processes and left to the responsibility of the individual.

In Australia, the recruitment of international students has transformed from earlier eras that saw education as a form of aid and development in the Asia-Pacific region such as occurred through the Colombo Plan in the 1950s, to the present business model of the marketisation of education. Australia was one of seven founding nations of the Colombo Plan, which originated in 1950 as a program to provide educational opportunities to students in South and Southeast Asia to undertake tertiary education in western countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom and later the United States (US). In 2014, the Australian Government announced a new Colombo plan that seeks to build collaborations with the Asia-Pacific region through funding Australian students to study in the region for up to one year. Indonesia is a particular target destination country for this program, which is designed to extend collaboration between the two countries. Although China does not participate in the Colombo Plan, a push by the Chinese government for mass tertiary education has generated high numbers of international students participating in global education markets. For several years, China has been the leading nationality amongst international students studying in Australia.

The *Fluid Security Project*¹ is focused on temporary migration, both of workers and students. Two of the four country case studies explore the circumstances of students from China and Indonesia. The study explores the interaction between human security and mobility and focuses on the

¹ Tazreiter, Claudia, Weber, Leanne, Pickering, Sharon, Segrave, Marie, McKernan, Helen, (2016) *Fluid Security in the Asia Pacific, Transnational Lives, Human Rights and State Control*, Palgrave MacMillan.

interaction of four domains of human security: legal security; personal security; economic security and cultural security. In analyzing the qualitative, interview data that was gathered the study identifies three primary processes that temporary migrants including students identified: first the processes that drive mobility (making the decision to leave); second the processes that mediate mobility (reaching Australia); and third, the processes of reception and inclusion in Australia.

Key findings

- For many students, the possibility of a permanent migration pathway was an important driver as was the goal of becoming a 'global citizen' as well as personal development.
- For Chinese students in particular, the global standing of specific universities as reflected in league tables was central to their decision to study in Australia.
- Cultural and family factors from the country of origin (China and Indonesia) were important factors in shaping the decision to migrate.
- Legal (visa) and financial barriers were common impediments to accessing the opportunities of temporary migration as an international student.
- Notably, our respondents expressed relatively low levels of trust in government and other officials, often preferring to turn to family and friends for support.
- Once in Australia visa conditions (linked to the monitoring of educational outcomes) and exploitation in paid work were common problems international students faced.
- Many students felt that they had a lack of information about their legal and other entitlements in Australia.
- Experiences of reception and inclusion by the wider Australian society were a major aspect of temporary migrant experience, with negative experiences of racism and cultural discrimination common among respondents.
- Isolation is the most commonly noted experience of International students in this study alongside problems with English language (Australian idiom).
- A notable common experience of all temporary migrants including International students, is the positive transnational social and cultural life they experience through technology mediated social networks.