

International students in Australia confronting cost-of-living crisis and housing shortage

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International students enrolled at Australian universities are among the many workers and young people hard hit by out-of-control living costs and insecure housing. Between the exorbitant cost of university education, inflation and their comparative lack of social connections and support, many international students are at acute risk of poverty, ill-health and homelessness.

A spate of recent media reports have provided graphic illustrations of the social disaster that federal and state governments are doing nothing to address. Twenty-seven-year-old Zoe Jiang from China told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that she was paying \$300 per week to sleep in a pitched tent within the living room of a student sharehouse.

In Perth, 27-year-old Sharlene from Zimbabwe told the radio station 6PR that she had been forced to sleep in a homeless shelter for two weeks, without her own bed, while sharing a shower with about 30 others. Sharlene reported being “a little traumatised” by the experience.

These stories are not unique—a large proportion of international students across Australia face insecure housing and rising costs of living. Students and young people of all nationalities and citizenship status are affected by this social and economic crisis. International students, however, have even greater difficulty navigating the rental market, since they are more likely to speak English as a second language, be unfamiliar with the local area, have no personal connections to help them and no renting history in Australia.

The housing and rental crisis impacting international students most sharply, is affecting students, youth and

workers in Australia of all backgrounds. According to several studies, Australia’s shortfall in social housing is 524,000 and is set to reach 671,000 in the next decade.

The federal Labor government’s second budget, released on May 9, includes a cut of 31.8 percent in real terms from 2023–24 to 2026–27 in the housing and community amenities budget.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Treasurer Jim Chalmers claim that this will be offset by a \$10 billion investment fund that might finance 30,000 new dwellings over five years. But even this is dependent on the mercies of the sharemarket where it would be invested. The investment fund is miniscule compared to the nearly \$300 billion estimated to be required to resolve Australia’s social housing shortfall.

Meanwhile, the government has pledged hundreds of billions for the military and is providing stage three tax cuts of tens of thousands of dollars overwhelmingly to the richest sections of the population.

Research released last year indicated that the proportion of international students who were financially secure in Australia’s two largest cities plummeted from 44 percent in 2019 to just 30 percent in 2020.

The paper, “International students and the impacts of precarity: Highly and extremely precarious students in Sydney and Melbourne prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic,” was based on survey interviews with more than 7,000 students, carried out by academics Alan Morris, Luke Ashton and Shaun Wilson.

The proportion of students in “extremely precarious” circumstances more than doubled between 2019 and 2020, from 5 to 11 percent. The study also found that a

significant proportion of respondents (12 percent of financially secure students and up to 84 percent of financially insecure students) had skipped meals to pay rent in 2020. The study outlined many other disturbing problems facing international students, including overcrowding, very long commute times and issues with landlords.

In 2020, at the start of the pandemic, international students were left without even a semblance of support from the government and their educational institutions. Then Prime Minister Scott Morrison told them all to “go home.”

The number of international students in Australia subsequently dropped sharply but has since rebounded with the reactionary campaign, promoted by the entire political establishment, to “live with COVID” and junk all public health measures.

The return of international students has not been accompanied by any public investment in student accommodation, and rents have skyrocketed. In Sydney, average rental charges have gone up by 33 percent in the last 12 months, with many suburbs, especially in inner areas close to the largest universities, increasing by even more.

International students also frequently confront exploitative workplaces, often being paid less than the legal minimum wage. Since they are in more desperate circumstances, they are forced to accept poor working conditions and are often unwilling or afraid to raise complaints about their treatment, for fear that this will negatively affect their visa prospects and leave them with no livelihood.

A 2019 report by Professor Bassina Farbenblum of the University of New South Wales and Associate Professor Laurie Berg from the University of Technology Sydney, in conjunction with the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, analysed data from a survey of 5,968 international students. They found that 38 percent of those surveyed did not seek information or help for fear of affecting their current or future visas, and 7 percent of all respondents reported that they had in fact lost their jobs as a result of a complaint.

One Chinese student living in Brisbane previously told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I have rarely heard of Chinese students ever getting the legal minimum wage. The maximum wage I have ever received is \$18 per hour and the lowest wage I’ve ever received is \$12

per hour.”

A 20-year-old student from Vietnam told ABC News of the strain they faced by trying to work and study simultaneously, with no time for anything else: “It’s a very tiring situation. You just study. If you are not studying, you are working... If you don’t work, you need to study. After you finish everything, you go back home tired, go to bed, sleep. The next day you are going to repeat again.”

Another 33-year-old student from Indonesia told the same outlet: “My rent is increasing every week or two. I am now doing two jobs. At the moment I am working around 40 hours per week, and that is barely enough to cover all my living expenses.”

The appalling conditions endured by many international students in Australia are not accidental, but rather are a result of deliberate government policy. International students have long been treated as “cash cows” by the Australian government—they pay multiple times the tuition fees paid by most local students and are excluded from almost all kinds of financial assistance from the government. Universities, rather than being institutions where students are welcome to gain knowledge and explore new ideas, are run as businesses, making vast profits by pumping out purportedly employable graduates for big business.

The cost-of-living and housing crisis facing international students is only a sharper expression of the same crisis facing the working class and students as a whole. It is rooted in the capitalist system’s drive for profit accumulation. In a rationally organised socialist society, students would have the right to study and live securely wherever they choose, with free, high-quality education available as a right to all, along with secure and dignified living conditions.



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