Report to Moreland City Council: International Students in the City of Moreland

Shanthi Robertson
Zoe Clark
Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University
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Executive Summary

This report is the result of research commissioned in 2012 by Moreland City Council and conducted by researchers from the Globalism Research Centre at RMIT University. The project used an online survey to gather information about international students living, working or studying in and around the City of Moreland. The project sought to find information about some of the key issues affecting international students at the community level and to assess their level of engagement with local government services and community events. The survey asked students a number of questions around their living arrangements, employment, level of community engagement, and knowledge of and access to Council events and services. Overall, the results show relatively high levels of satisfaction with living and employment conditions, although the data suggests that financial pressures around the costs of living, particularly transport, accommodation and entertainment, are key concerns for international students. The other key finding was that although the vast majority of students surveyed would like the opportunity for more involvement in the local community, only a small minority were aware of or had experienced many of the events, services and facilities offered in the municipality. Cost was also a key factor identified by students as impacting on their participation in community events and activities, particularly the cost of public transportation. This suggests that more effective promotion of these events and facilities to international students would be valuable, with a particular emphasis in this promotion placed on events and services that are either free or relatively affordable, and easily accessible.

Introduction

International students are being increasingly recognised as a significant demographic in local communities in inner city Melbourne. While in the past, the social inclusion and provision of services to international students has been seen to be the domain of education providers, more recent approaches have acknowledged the role of local community and local government (Grimwade 2009). This includes developing services and information for international students around housing, employment and health, as well as developing opportunities for community participation. The role of Council is often crucial in this respect, and local governments in Melbourne have been increasingly engaged in work that assesses the needs of international students in their communities and develops programs and policies to meet these needs.

The City of Moreland is located Melbourne’s inner north, easily accessible to CBD university campuses, and with more affordable housing options than the CBD. This means that Moreland retains a relatively high number of international student residents. Although the Census does not record whether residents have an international student status, a conservative estimate, based on the number of full time students resident in Moreland and
the proportion of these who are likely to be international, would put the number of international students currently resident in the City of Moreland at over 4000. An additional number of international students who reside in nearly Local Government Areas would travel to Moreland for work and study. Moreland City Council has recognised the role and the rights of international students as members of the multicultural community in their Multicultural Action Plan 2011/2012. Moreland also has a very robust existing framework of local services, events and facilities that are available to all residents, including international students. Anecdotal reports from community service providers, however, suggest that international students are often not aware of these services, facilities and events or do not know how to access them. This report represents a first step in understanding the needs of international students who live, work and study in the City of Moreland and in understanding their level of engagement with Council services. It will be drawn on in subsequent promotion and planning of Council and community services to address the needs of international students in the community.

**Background: International Student Community Issues**

While the international student community is far from homogenous, there are a number of characteristics that are shared by a majority of international students. Most international students are aged between 21 and 30 years old. The vast majority are renters, with most residing in shared rental accommodation or purpose-built student housing. Most tend to share their accommodation with other international students, often of the same nationality. Most will move several times during their stay in Australia. Newly arrived students are more likely to reside in homestay accommodation or purpose-built student housing on or near campus. Over time they then tend to seek out cheaper share house options. All student visa holders must be enrolled in full time study (usually 12 contact hours per week), but are able to work legally up to 20 hours a week during semester and unlimited hours during study breaks. The majority work in the low-skilled services sector, such as in retail or hospitality. Working over the 20 hours per week at ‘cash-in-hand’ jobs is a very common practice. The majority of international students use public transport frequently to commute between workplaces, educational providers and residences. Several key issues of concern for the international student community have been identified in previous research. These issues will be briefly discussed in the following sections of this report.

**Community engagement**

Research consistently shows that international students mainly socialize with other international students, often of the same nationality, although the vast majority would like to have more social contact with local students and local communities (Smart et al. 2000, Hellstén 2002, Deumert et al. 2005). Recent research also reveals that students do attend events within the larger ethnic community, particularly religious and cultural events and
festivals, but they tend to remain on the periphery of established/permanent ethnic communities (Singh and Cabraal 2010). There are often class, generational, or regional differences between the student communities and the permanent migrant communities which hinder further integration. The City of Melbourne 2010 International Student Survey showed that international students face substantial barriers to engaging with recreational activities in the community. These barriers include affordability and lack of time due to study and work commitments. The study also noted that a lack of information regarding events and services, coupled with issues regarding access to and convenience of public transport, as well as a lack of friends, may be contributing barriers to social engagement (City of Melbourne, 2010).

**Mental health**

International students often suffer from mental health issues due to stress and acculturation problems. Demographically, international students are of the age when mental health problems are most likely to surface. Research shows that stress is heightened for international students due to the experience of new and often unfamiliar academic practices, the broad range of knowledge and practical skills needed to manage day-to-day living in Australia, and the tendency to delay professional help-seeking for mental health problems (Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer, 2011). This can be linked to cultural stigmas around requiring mental health services, and the fact that referrals to external psychiatric and psychological services often incur significant financial costs for students.

**Safety**

Students have been considered more vulnerable to street violence due to the areas they live in, their use of public transport late at night, and because violence can be racially motivated. Student safety also extends to sexual assault, family violence, and workplace safety (Nyland et al. 2010)

**Employment**

There are significant reports of the labour market exploitation of international students, including co-ethnic exploitation (Nyland et al. 2009). There are increasing reports of female students undertaking sex work (Lantz 2005). It is extremely common for students to work over the allowed 20 hours during semester, working cash-in-hand for lower than award rates. Doing so breaches their visa conditions and makes students vulnerable to deportation - thus the threat of being reported to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship can be used by employers to further exploit students. Shift work is also common which can create health and stress issues especially when combined with full-time study (Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer 2011).

**Housing**
Research shows that international students can be vulnerable to housing stress due to a lack of access to social services and lack of social safety net; a tendency to rent in the context of the tight rental market; and cultural and economic factors that may make them more likely to have difficulty accessing affordable and appropriate housing and more likely to face exploitation or discrimination in the housing market (Centre for Multicultural Youth 2008, Consumer Affairs Victoria 2007, Foley 2009, Smith et al. 2007). There is also some evidence that these groups may be affected by secondary and tertiary homelessness. Access to adequate and affordable housing is difficult for international students, especially when they have limited financial means and lack a rental history in Australia, which can lead to informal leases and subletting within the community itself. There has been evidence of students living in overcrowded rental accommodation and in substandard conditions in rooming houses within Moreland and elsewhere in Victoria (Consumer Affairs Victoria 2007, Foley 2009). Housing is not only important for wellbeing and security. How international students experience housing, and relationships within share houses, influences levels of overall satisfaction with their international tertiary education experience (Obeng-Odoom 2012).

Problem gambling

This is an emerging issue that is just starting to be recognized. Increased rates of gambling are apparent among Indian and Chinese international students compared to local students, and this has been tied to stress, social isolation and acculturation issues (Thomas 2010).

Research Methods

This research was conducted via a survey aimed at gathering information about the needs and issues facing international students living, working or studying in the local area. The survey, titled ‘International Student Profile and Issues in the City of Moreland’, was conducted online, using Qualtrics Survey Software (www.qualtrics.com) over the period 2 July to 17 August 2012. 104 students in total completed the survey, although two fifths of respondents only completed the survey partially.

The survey was promoted to international students via a multi-pronged approach. This included distribution through local service providers and organisations specifically catering to the needs of international students. Information about the research project and the survey link was distributed to service providers, university student unions and groups, and local organisations such as libraries and community houses. Posters and flyers were put up at all of the Moreland City Libraries, various neighbourhood houses and at several student accommodation sites. Social media was instrumental in promoting the awareness of the online survey, and a Facebook page was created as a point of easy access for those who found out about the survey via the posters. Attempts were made to connect with smaller
student clubs and associations via Facebook, as a means of raising awareness of the survey at a grassroots level.

The survey included 40 questions, based around the following themes:

- Basic demographic characteristics of international students living, working and studying in Moreland and surrounding areas
- How international students in Moreland and surrounding areas describe their current accommodation, employment and general well-being
- Levels of access to and satisfaction with local services around accommodation, employment and well-being amongst international students in Moreland and surrounding areas
- Levels of access to and satisfaction with various Council facilities, services and events amongst international students in Moreland and surrounding areas

The survey was quantitative, with an option for respondents to offer qualitative feedback to the final question: ‘What services would you like to see in your local area for international students?’ The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete, and all respondents remained anonymous. Upon finishing the survey, respondents were invited to enter a prize draw to win free movie tickets or a Coles gift voucher by sending an email to a specified address.

**Scope and limitations**

The project initially aimed to only survey international students living, working or studying within the City of Moreland. However, accessing adequate response rates for this specific group was challenging, as there was no means to identify this specific population or send the survey directly to them. In addition, pilot testing revealed that international students may be unfamiliar with the Australian local council system and thus not be able to identify their place of work, study or residence by municipality. In light of this, the target population was extended to ‘international students living, working or studying in or around central or northern Melbourne’ so as to attract more responses and to make it clearer to respondents if they were eligible to complete the survey. As a result, some of the respondents surveyed did not live, work or study in the Moreland local government area. However, they did live, work or study in adjacent areas, and therefore were likely to frequently travel to or through Moreland. It must also be noted that this study may have more easily attracted responses from international students who are most connected with their community, as the study reached them via word-of-mouth, service providers or agencies, or social media. A natural limitation and challenge of studies like this one is that it is often difficult to reach the most socially isolated international students.
Findings

The survey reached international students from a variety of suburbs within and surrounding the Moreland municipality. Most respondents lived, worked and/or studied in the following suburbs: Ascot Vale, Bundoora, Brunswick, Brunswick East, Brunswick West, Carlton, Carlton North, Coburg, Collingwood, Fairfield, Fawkner, Fitzroy, Glenroy, Gowanbrae, Melbourne CBD, Northcote, North Melbourne, Parkville, Pascoe Vale South, Preston, Reservoir, and Thornbury. 56% of respondents were female, 43% were male, and one percent preferred not to specify their gender. Just over half of respondents (52%) were aged between 18 to 21 years, and approximately one third of respondents (27%) fell into the 22 to 25 year age bracket. 13% of respondents were aged between 26 and 29, 6% were aged between 30 and 33, and just 2% fell into the 34 to 37 age bracket (see Figure 1). The majority of respondents had been in Australia for less than one year (Figure 2) and were studying a Bachelor Degree (Figure 3).

*Please note that respondents who selected ‘Other’ specified that they were studying English language courses.
Housing

The following figures give an overview of the housing situation for international students surveyed. As illustrated in Table 1, the majority of international students surveyed indicated that they lived in private rental accommodation. It is likely that the majority of these students were in ‘share house’ type accommodation. Of the 19% of respondents who were sharing bedrooms in private rental accommodation, 31% indicated that there were more than five bedrooms where they lived. This indicates that some of these respondents may in fact be in boarding house accommodation, or in share houses that may be at risk of overcrowding. A significant number of respondents also lived in student accommodation provided by education providers. This is consistent with the fact that a majority of respondents had been in Australia for one year or less, as many international students spend their initial year in student accommodation, and then seek out share house or other more affordable options once they are more familiar with the local housing market. 37% of the students surveyed lived with other international students who were either the same nationality or spoke the same language as them (see Figure 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Which of the following best describes where you live?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In private rental accommodation with my own bedroom</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In private rental accommodation with a shared bedroom</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In student accommodation (e.g. on campus/provided by your educational institution)</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a homestay (living with a family in Melbourne)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relative’s home</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rooming house/Boarding house</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other. Please specify.</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Which of the following best describes the people you live with?

- Local students / Australians: 13%
- Other: Please specify: 7%
- International students that are the same nationality / speak the same language as you: 37%
- A mix of local students / Australians and international students: 24%
- A mix of international students of different nationalities: 19%
The data shows that international students experience generally high levels of satisfaction with most aspects listed in regard to accommodation. The lowest level of satisfaction experienced by international students was in regard to the cost of accommodation. Respondents living in student accommodation were generally less satisfied with the cost of accommodation than respondents living in private rental accommodation. 69% of respondents living in student accommodation indicated that they were somewhat dissatisfied with the cost, whilst 23% of respondents living in private rental accommodation were somewhat dissatisfied. It is interesting to observe that none of the respondents living in student accommodation indicated that they were at all satisfied with the cost, however 44% of respondents living in private rental accommodation were somewhat satisfied, and 14% were very satisfied. The high level of dissatisfaction with the cost of housing could indicate that international students may be spending a high proportion of their potentially limited income on rent.

It is encouraging to observe that the highest levels of satisfaction overall were observed in convenience, security of accommodation, and safety of the surrounding area (see Figure 5). Similar levels of satisfaction with privacy and safety of the surrounding area were apparent. However, the data suggest that respondents living in private rental accommodation experienced slightly higher levels of satisfaction in relation to having a secure place to store their possessions than respondents living in student accommodation.

**Figure 5: Satisfaction levels with aspects of housing**

The responses also show a lack of awareness of housing services (Figure 6). The most frequently used services were real estate agents and university housing services. This suggests that providing information about housing to international students could be best managed via these services.
Employment

Approximately one third of international students surveyed described their work experience in Australia in the past 6 months as ‘not working’. This may be due to the high representation of more recently arrived international students in the sample. Of the international students who were working casual or part-time, approximately one third were working between 16 and 20 hours per week during semester. It is interesting to note that 16% indicated that they were working between 21 – 25 hours per week during semester, which is over the 20 hour per week limit imposed by student visas (see Figure 8). Hours worked outside of semester (during university breaks) were significantly higher, as illustrated by Figure 9 below. 24% of respondents indicated that they worked more than 25 hours per week outside of semester, and 12% of respondents worked between 21 and 25 hours. The two charts below demonstrate that international students who are working take on a variety of hours, and that many would work more hours if allowed.

Of the respondents surveyed who indicated that they worked either casual or part-time, the majority were ‘somewhat satisfied’ with all aspects of their work listed below in Figure 10. It is perhaps not surprising to observe that the statement ‘the number of hours you work’ attracted the highest percentage of dissatisfaction. Further research needs to be done,
however, to ascertain whether students would be satisfied with increased or decreased working hours. It seems likely that student prefer more working hours due to needing the income, but find that this effects study and social commitments.

**Figure 10: Satisfaction with aspects of employment**

![Satisfaction with aspects of employment chart]

**Community Engagement and Social Inclusion**

Whilst the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had gotten to know different people where they lived, and knew where to look for local information and services when they needed help, they would like more opportunities to get involved in community activities. 67% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I would like more opportunities to get involved in community activities*. Further to this, 59% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *many local activities and services are too expensive for me* (see Figure 11). These responses suggest that many international students would welcome the opportunity to participate in community events provided that they were affordable, or free.

**Figure 11: Satisfaction and engagement with local community**

![Satisfaction and engagement with local community chart]
It is encouraging to note that approximately 55% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they knew where to look for local information and services when they needed help. However, further research would be needed to more accurately ascertain whether this knowledge actually translates to international students accessing such services. It is also worth noting, as Figure 12 suggests, that the majority of international students surveyed had a positive experience of feeling welcomed in the community. 42% of respondents rated the ‘community friendliness’ as good, whilst 20% described it as excellent. Although a smaller percentage believed that it needed some improvement, this is a solid basis from which to build upon in terms of creating and promoting local events that give international students an opportunity to further engage with the community.

A lack of involvement or engagement with local activities may be due to, as the data suggests, the costs or perceived costs of local activities and services. When given the opportunity to give general feedback on what services or improvements respondents would like to see for international students, a common theme was affordability. For instance, although beyond the scope of local government, the lack of access to public transport concession came up frequently in the qualitative comments as a barrier to students’ community participation. As one respondent stated, “Students are low income community, so provided facilities or service should accommodate their capability [sic].”

The following comment made by one respondent gives an idea of the constraints that international students face when it comes to engaging with their local community:

“...living in Melbourne without concession fare had stopped me from entering the city when necessary. I only go to the city when classes are conducted. I would also like to see more options for international students to be involved in social events, engage with other local and international students through official organisations.”

Results for this section show overwhelmingly that local facilities, events and services are under-utilized by international students. A lack of engagement with social events and
cultural events may be due to limited local knowledge, especially considering more than half of survey respondents indicated that they had been in Australia for one year or less. Responses indicate that the majority of those surveyed are unaware of parks and outdoor facilities within Moreland. Over 80% of respondents indicated that they were not aware of the four outdoor facilities or parks listed (see Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Awareness of local parks & outdoor facilities**

![Figure 13: Awareness of local parks & outdoor facilities](image)

A similar trend was observed in regard to local art facilities and events and local libraries. A vast majority of respondents indicated that they were unaware of the Counihan Gallery in Brunswick or the MOREART public art show. Similarly, the majority of respondents were unaware of Moreland City Libraries (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Awareness of local libraries**

![Figure 14: Awareness of local libraries](image)

Brunswick Library showed the highest level of awareness and use amongst international students. This suggests that Brunswick library may be a good local site for any future activities for international students, especially given it is in a location that is well serviced by public transport.

The data also points to a lack of awareness of prominent Moreland-based public events such as the Sydney Road Festival. Whilst a minority had attended listed events, a greater number of respondents indicated that whilst they were aware of the event, they had not attended (see Figure 15 below). This perhaps suggests that more structured opportunities for students to participate in these types of public events in groups might be welcomed. The Sydney Road Street Party, for example, would be an ideal opportunity to co-ordinate a group outing specifically for newly arrived international students, as this festival coincides with the beginning of semester one for most education providers.
The main challenge appears to be disseminating information regarding local facilities, events and activities, as one respondent explained:

“More involvement in sports, and cultural activities, is not the amount of activities, is the information of them is not reaching the students [sic]”.

Mental health

The data suggests that international students surveyed described their physical and mental health as generally well (see Figure 16). Quality of sleep appears to be the poorest area of international students’ wellbeing. As illustrated in Figure 17, the majority of respondents indicated that they seek support from friends, relatives or housemates.
Problem gambling

The data does not reflect a high rate of gambling amongst the international students surveyed. The vast majority did not gamble at all, and those who did gamble usually only did so occasionally. The low rates of gambling in this survey may also be tied to the sampling. The most socially isolated students who the survey may not have reached are probably the group most likely to be at risk of problem gambling. A much larger project would need to be undertaken to assess the real scope of problem gambling in the international student community.

Figure 18: Frequency of gambling amongst international students
Affordability

Throughout the data, affordability was raised as a key issue in all aspects of international students’ experience. The cost of public transport may also be a factor preventing students from engaging with community events, facilities and services that they have to travel to access. When asked to rate the cost of public transport on a scale from ‘needs a lot of improvement’ to ‘excellent’, 38% respondents selected ‘needs a lot of improvement’, 25% selected ‘needs some improvement’, 14% rated it as ‘adequate’, another 15% selected ‘good’, whereas only 4% of respondents rated the cost of public transport as ‘excellent’. A further 4% were ‘not sure’ (see Figure 19). A similar trend was observed in the responses to the questions of housing affordability (Figure 20) and affordability of living (Figure 21).

Figure 19: Cost of public transport

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs a lot of improvement</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs some improvement</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know/Not Sure</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 20: Satisfaction with housing affordability (e.g. rent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs a lot of improvement</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs some improvement</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know/Not Sure</td>
<td>2%</td>
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</table>
Recommendations

- Further research needs to take place into the needs of international students in the community and the issues they face. A targeted approach to recruitment and a qualitative methodology may be needed for subsequent research to acquire a deeper understanding of the experiences of students in the municipality, and to access a more diverse sample of students.

- The development of activities specifically targeted towards international students, including strategically timed events to coincide with students arriving prior to the commencement of their courses may be of benefit. ‘Welcome events’ for students such as those that have been run by the City of Melbourne and the City of Wollongong could be investigated as a means to familiarize students with their local government area and with local events and services.

- If the cost of travel to events and facilities could be addressed on some level, this could be a significant incentive for students to participate in community events. For example, free or subsidised Myki cards or Metcards could be offered to students for transport to specific events. These could be distributed through student organizations on campus.

- Better dissemination of information about Council events and services to international students as a target group is required. One way of achieving this may be by improving co-ordination between education providers, student groups and local council. For example, information about local events and services could be publicized through student unions and international student groups. Social
media channels may be most effective in this respect. The promotion events of should emphasis those that are free or affordable.

- As students spend significant amounts of time at work, the workplace may be another avenue to improve community engagement and social inclusion. Identifying which local businesses tend to employ international students would be of benefit to further research.

- The development of peer supported social programs may assist with community engagement. For example, organized group outings or excursions to events and facilities in the municipality may encourage participation and help spread information about these events and facilities via word of mouth.

- A ‘drop in’ centre specifically for students, possibly based at an existing local facility such as a library, could function as a central point for the dissemination of information and for students to have ownership of a community space. The Couch International Student Centre, run by the Salvation Army in Melbourne CBD, and the Darebin Overseas Student Advisory (DOSA) are good models of community-based organisations designed specifically for international students that provide spaces for international students to engage in a more meaningful way with their community, and also an environment in which information about local services can be sourced.
References


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