

Strengthening International Students' Access to University Support Services

A research report from the Graduate Student Association of the University of Melbourne



Report developed by Cara Margetts (GSA Graduate Policy & Advocacy Officer)
with additional support from Rachna Muddagouni (GSA CEO) and
Natasha Abrahams (GSA Manager – Policy & Advocacy)

Layout and design
Rosina Lazzaro

Funded by University of Melbourne SSAF program
© Graduate Student Association University of Melbourne 2021

Contents

Introduction 2

Method 2

Background 3

Usage of University support 4

Barriers to access 5

Awareness of services 5

 Counselling and health services 6

 UMSU Legal and Advocacy 6

 Student Equity and Disability 6

 Safer Community Program 7

 University Chaplaincy 7

 Information dissemination 7

Availability of support 8

Language and cultural competence 8

Stigma 9

Graduate-specific support 9

Research limitations 9

Conclusion and recommendations 10

References 11

Appendix A. Supplementary data 12



Introduction

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. We are led by 8 GSA Board members and 10 Representative Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 29,000 constituents, we represent graduate student interests to the University and wider community, provide student engagement events, activities, and information to the graduate student community, and support 160 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for *inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.*

From 2020 onwards with the outset of the global pandemic, International Graduate Students continue to experience a range of challenges accessing advocacy and wellbeing support services. Covid-19 has exacerbated the demand for accessible support as students endure social isolation, the fatigue of online learning, financial stress due to economic downturn and unemployment, and other personal challenges in relation to mental and physical health.

International Students have reported many constraints in accessing University of Melbourne support services. Some key challenges highlighted include lack of awareness of the support services offered by the University, services that are culturally appropriate acknowledging diversity, lack of appropriate language skills to navigate the systems in Australia, graduate-specific support, and stigma around accessing the appropriate health care in relation to mental and sexual health. Based on feedback from International Graduate Students, this report offers recommendations for GSA to advocate the University to increase and strengthen support service access.

Method

To develop this report, we have analysed the data from GSA's Student Resilience Project survey, which was undertaken mid-2020 to identify and gauge graduate students' health and wellbeing. More than 600 University of Melbourne graduate students contributed to the Student Resilience survey, with 324 International Student participants from 47 different countries. Participants from the top five countries included were China, India, Indonesia, the United States, and Canada. This report also draws on feedback from GSA's International Student Town Halls, International Student Podcast episodes, and the range of experiences gathered from student representatives.

Quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS and qualitative analysis with NVivo. This report also refers to facts and assumptions gathered from a literature review, including surveys and research findings to provide holistic understandings of International Student support needs.

Background

This report explores how to improve International Students' use of University support services, as we have received student-led feedback and suggestions on the need for more suitable and effective support offerings. Table 1 below outlines the wide range of services available for students.

Table 1: Overview of University of Melbourne Services

Service	Overview	Accessing support
Stop 1	Stop 1 is a centralised information hub that connects students with information around enrolment, student administration, booking support services, peer programs and course advice.	Students can call, message, e-chat, or have face-to-face appointments with Stop 1 by booking online.
Health Service	The University Health Service offers free medical assistance to students. Students with Medicare cards are bulk-billed. International Students or staff members need to bring health insurance cards to claim rebates on fees.	Students can book online for a telehealth or in-person appointment, and appointments are available on workdays from 8.45 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS)	CAPS provide students with free, confidential, and short-term professional counselling. Initial appointments can go up to 45 minutes, which involves a 15-minute questionnaire and a 30-minute consultation. Students can access up to 6 sessions per year. CAPS highlight that most students attend one to four sessions.	Students can book an appointment through an online portal. Students are encouraged to book an appointment at 9am when spaces are released. There is also an emergency crisis support line available to student's after-hours. If students are unable to book an appointment, a brief triage phone call can be arranged to work out options. Students have the option of choosing their counsellor.
UMSU Legal and Advocacy	UMSU Legal and Advocacy is a division of the University of Melbourne Student Union that provides support and advice on different student matters. The Advocacy Service involves assistance on academic and administrative issues, such as student grievances and complaints, discrimination, sexual assault. The Legal Service focuses on legal advice, information, and referrals, such as financial counselling or government payment issues.	Students can fill out online forms, email, call or interact face-to-face with UMSU Advocacy and Legal services. Students can expect a response within one day and encourage students to signal in their form if the issue is urgent. The UMSU Advocacy and Legal team also strongly recommend that students refer themselves early in a challenging situation and reach out even when unsure.
Student Equity and Disability	Student Equity and Disability Support provides services for students who require ongoing assistance, including students with disabilities, carers (who look after people with disabilities, medical conditions, or an older person), cultural and religious commitments, emergency volunteers and elite performers.	Students can voluntarily register for support through an online form and need to supply supporting documentation. Students are encouraged to apply at the beginning of their course or before assessment due dates.
Safer Community Program	The Safer Community Program gives support and advice to University of Melbourne members about inappropriate, concerns or threatening behaviour.	Students can call, email, or visit the Safer Community team. The program can link students with external and internal support services and report incidents to the University or police.
University Chaplaincy	The University Chaplaincy team connects students with religious and spiritual groups, identifies nearby places for worship and provides support groups for wellbeing and grief.	Students can call individual chaplains that are listed on the Chaplaincy website.

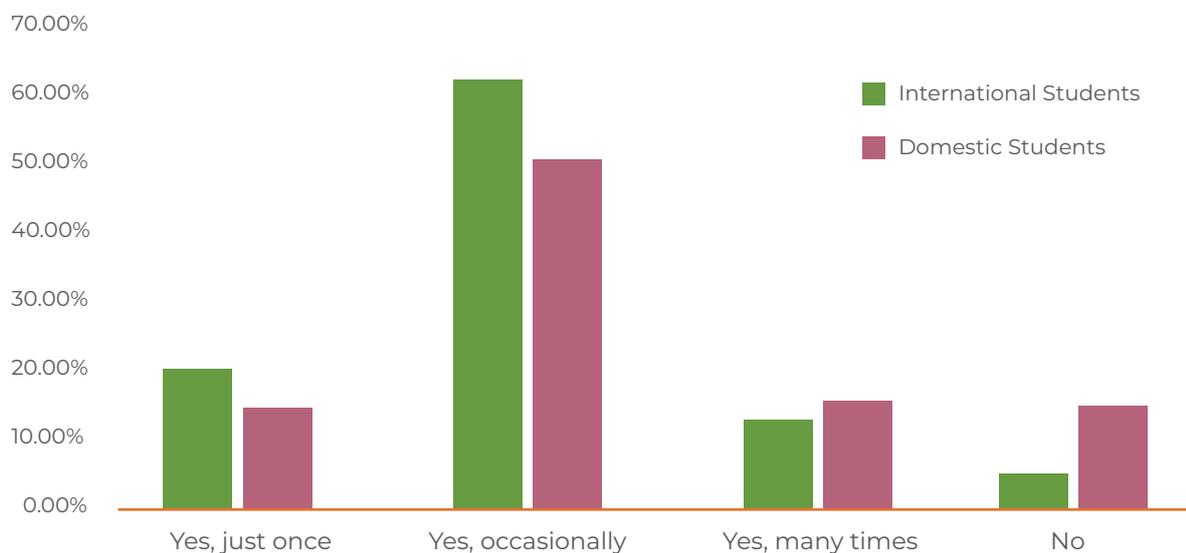
Usage of University support

When Australia's International Student enrolments soared in the mid-2000s, researchers identified that many students struggle to access adequate health and wellbeing support (Russell, Thomson and Rosenthal 2008). More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened access to support, demonstrated through the exclusion of International Students from Australia's JobKeeper and JobSeeker disaster payments (Kinsella 2020; Eddie and Hall 2021). Offshore students are enduring ongoing hardships, demonstrated by the Council of International Students Australia's finding that 93% of offshore students experienced a decline in mental health and wellbeing after long-term isolation from campus (Lim 2021, p. 6).

Many students depend on using university services to support stable and high-quality educational experiences. Existing Australian research has found that educational institutions are well-positioned to support students by providing services that meet and suit student needs (Poljski, Quiazon and Tran 2014, p. 156; Farbenblum and Berg 2020, p. 497). Domestic students are more likely to be linked with local support networks and healthcare systems. International Students may not have similar levels of foundational support or guidance (Russell, Thomson and Rosenthal 2008, p. 160). This lack of community connectedness results in International Students depending heavily and over-relying on the University to provide information and services for support.

To support our understanding of how many International Students utilise University support services, we asked students how often they access support services. International Student responses are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Student Usage of University Services



Note: International Students (n=324), domestic students (n=312)

The results from Figure 1 above show:

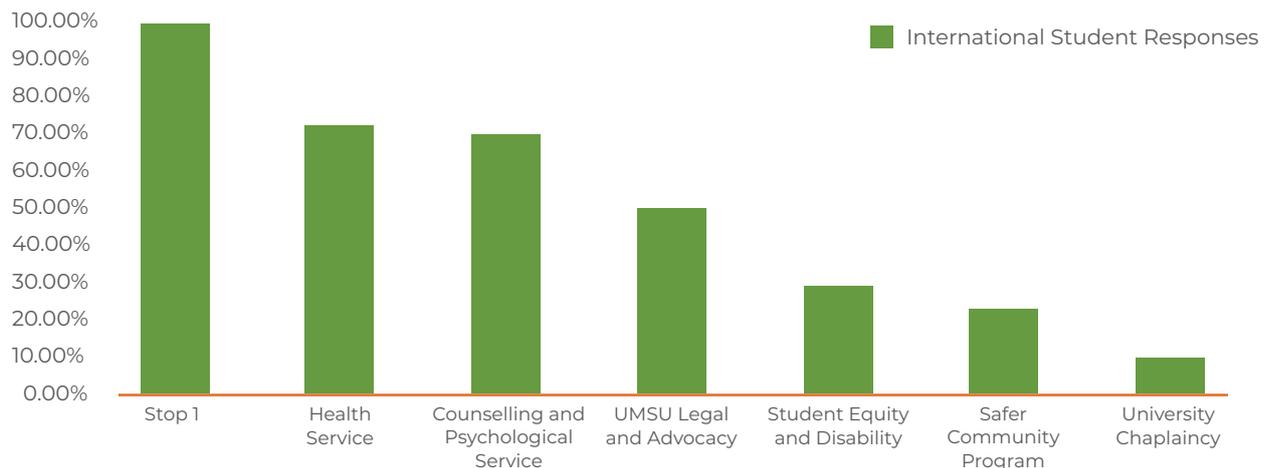
- Over 60% of International Student respondents occasionally use University support services.
- Nearly 20% of International Student respondents have used a support service only once.
- Under 15% of International Student respondents regularly utilise support.
- Less than 5% of International Student respondents reported no use of University support services.

Barriers to access

Awareness of services

International Students' awareness of University services has a direct correlation between usage and how the services are accessed. Figure 2 below shows International Student responses regarding awareness of different University support services.

Figure 2: International Student Awareness of University Support Services



Based on the responses of International Students, there is limited awareness of safety, advocacy, and rights-based support services. However, students reported a high awareness of the University's centralised information hub, Stop 1.

According to the data, International Students and Domestic Students demonstrate similar levels of support service awareness, which indicates the need to increase the knowledge of both student groups. Fewer International Students were aware of University Chaplaincy and Student Equity and Disability support. *For example, only 33% of International Students indicated knowledge of Student Equity and Disability service, in contrast to 55% of Domestic Students (see Appendix A on p. 14 for a visual comparison).*

Stop 1

As shown in figure 2, nearly all International Student respondents are aware of Stop 1. Stop 1 connects students' knowledge about other services. The high level of student awareness of Stop 1 suggests the ongoing need to continue to market this service widely and increase the reach. One international coursework student reflected:

“ I only realised there are such support services when I almost finished my degree. So it would be great if the University could officially send an email to new students telling them all the resources they can access at Uni, in particular to International Students, because they basically know nothing (including what resources are there, how they work, how to access) when they come to Australia initially. ”

Counselling and health services

In figure 2, nearly two-thirds of International Students indicated they knew about University counselling and health services. Male-identifying students indicated a lower awareness for counselling and psychological services, which reflects Australian higher education trends that find male students are less likely to report having sought help for mental health challenges (Skromanis et al. 2018, p. 10).

Despite nearly two-thirds of International Students indicating awareness for counselling and health services, many respondents expressed difficulties in accessing simple plain language information about how to book an appointment or healthcare requirements. For example, some respondents were unsure about the cost of the programs and if the University counselling and health appointments were included in their Overseas Student Health Cover.

UMSU Legal and Advocacy

Students who experience discrimination or hardship need access to legal and advocacy support. UMSU Legal and Advocacy provides students individual legal help and support to navigate University processes that can impact their student journey. UMSU Legal Service also provides additional legal advice and referrals on other legal issues. However, as shown in Figure 2 above, less than half of International Student respondents indicated awareness about UMSU Legal and Advocacy. Lack of awareness of this important service undermines students' capacity to receive independent advice and does not safeguard their rights.

Student Equity and Disability

International Students with disabilities and/or caring responsibilities require targeted support measures to engage with the University community. Under the University's Student Equity and Disability program, caring responsibilities involve looking after people with disabilities, medical conditions, or an elderly person.

As revealed in Figure 2 above, it is concerning that only one-third of respondents are aware of the University's Student Equity and Disability service. One International Student voiced their confusion around what support is available:

“ Easier access to information. There is no single web or information sheet that contains all the services specific for International Students. ”

Graduate researchers face additional constraints seeking equity and disability support as the processes are unclear and lack information. Feedback from graduate researchers suggests that despite registering with Student Equity and Disability, students are often unable to access the support they initially requested. This disparity between graduate researchers' needs and what support offerings are available can impact academic progress, as well as students' health and wellbeing. One International Student reflected:

“ I've often had the experience of Stop 1 and Disability/Equity Support staff searching their FAQ site in front of me and suggesting I should try this next time. It's extremely condescending and unhelpful, because if I had found my answer on the FAQ I never would've gone out of my way to make an appointment. I understand that they need to search the site themselves because staff members are not perfect encyclopedias of UniMelb policy, but the attitude is really disheartening, especially for those of us with disabilities who feel like we're constantly having to prove ourselves to some sort of bureaucratic authority that doesn't take us seriously. ”

Safer Community Program

The provision of safety information and advice given to International Students is crucial. Research conducted by the University of New South Wales found that one-quarter of Australian International Students had experienced harassment or verbal abuse during Australia's Covid-19 pandemic (Farbenblum and Berg 2020, p. 498).

The University's Safer Community Program provides advice and support to students who have endured inappropriate or threatening behaviour. However, as shown in Figure 2 above, less than one-third of International Student respondents are aware of the University's Safer Community Program. Furthermore, UMSU's International Student Survey found that over 70% of International Students were unaware of the emergency accommodation service offered by the University (UMSU 2020, p. 11).

It is alarming to note that less than one-third of International Student respondents know about the University's safety and emergency programs. These services support students who experience financial hardship, discrimination, harassment, sexual assault, and other issues. From these facts provided, it is important that the provision of University safety support is widely advertised.

University Chaplaincy

Figure 2 above shows that only 10% of International Students indicated awareness of the University Chaplaincy program. This is the lowest awareness of any University service in our survey. International Students enrol at the University from many different countries and may seek to join a local community affiliating their religious and spiritual beliefs. Transitioning to a new cultural environment is a challenging process, and faith support groups and guidance from religious leaders allow students to develop a stronger sense of belonging. To increase students' access to the University Chaplaincy service, the program should be widely promoted to increase awareness.

Information dissemination

International Students need to receive clear and timely information from the University to improve awareness of support offerings. This is especially vital for those services with critically low levels of awareness, including University Chaplaincy, Student Equity and Disability, and the Safer Community Program. One International Student echoed this need for greater communications by highlighting:

“ There is no clear or regular communication from the university to the students. We get one email out of the blue and then no update on the same for weeks. That should definitely change.”

International Students suggested other ways to receive information, including:

- Clear and updated information on the University FAQ pages.
- Receiving information through commonly used communication channels, such as modules on the Learning Management System.
- Greater outreach from the University during challenging times.
- Peer-to-peer communication, especially for new students.

Availability of support

International Students are unable to access necessary support due to a lack of timely assistance. Many International Students find it challenging to book counselling and appointments at Stop 1. This impacts students' mental health and, in some cases, leads to poor academic performance.

GSA is aware that students studying in Indonesia and India cannot access counselling appointments due to their Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) insurance provider conditions. These insurance conditions restrict some offshore students from receiving healthcare and/or reimbursements when accessing Australian medical services.

In our survey, International Student respondents identified measures that would improve their access to services:

- 60% of International Students indicated the need for shorter waiting lists.
- More than 50% of International Students suggested that increasing the availability of online appointments would improve access.
- Many students requested the development of additional counselling and wellbeing programs.
- Some students reflected on the need for long-term health and wellbeing support.

Language and cultural competence

The University of Melbourne is home to diverse ethnic and cultural communities. Recent literature has identified that a lack of cultural sensitivity within Australian social settings can marginalise International Students (Dovchin 2020, p. 812; Coroners Court of Victoria 2019). Research on the Australian migrant experience has similarly identified that language exclusion affects community participation (Wille 2011, p. 80). Language exclusion is also correlated with self-stigma, which decreases students' confidence in seeking help (Ma, Zhu and Bresnahan 2021, p. 6).

In our survey, International Students highlighted the need for greater cultural competence and recognition within University support services:

- One in five International Students respondents indicated the need to employ staff members fluent in languages other than English to improve the accessibility of support services.
- One in ten International Student respondents indicated that offering written information in a language other than English would improve support service use.
- Students who speak English as an Additional Language have often expressed the need to access bilingual counsellors who can speak their native language and share cultural knowledge and experiences.

Stigma

Global research suggests that International Students can be discouraged from seeking support due to socially embedded negative attitudes towards mental and sexual health (Skromanis et al. 2018, p. 9).

In our research, several International Students expressed an unwillingness to seek University care due to perceived social stigma. One student shared that they experienced discomfort attending an in-person appointment due to the shame associated with mental health. Another student expressed anxiety about repercussions against their enrolment status if they discussed mental health challenges in a University counselling appointment.

The University should continue to develop mental health care programs to promote positive messaging and endorse safe spaces for students to share personal challenges. For example, GSA has promoted student wellbeing through programs, including the International Student Podcast, Study Buddies, and hardship vouchers; and advocacy efforts including the Student Resilience Report.

Graduate-specific support

Nearly half of University students are studying at a graduate level. However, graduate-specific support is limited within some services. Several International Students expressed that University services do not currently understand graduate student issues, for example:

“ Support staff often seem confused or less well-versed in graduate matters. They seem to rely instead on other graduate students who have sought support from them.”

To develop suitable graduate support offerings, University service delivery staff should be provided with increased support and training (Diekelmann and Mikol 2003, p. 386; Ross, Ta and Grieve 2019, p. 190; Beasy 2020, p. 896). Due to short-term or temporary contracts, some staff may struggle to access training, such as cultural competency training or mental health first aid. Improving the training available to staff would allow for more supportive interactions with students.

Research limitations

1. Due to this study being undertaken during Covid-19, there was no ability to conduct focus groups and interviews.
2. GSA is unable to determine if students not connected with University services participated in the survey.
3. This report does not include other access barriers experienced by students, such as housing, gender and sexuality, and employability.
4. The sample size is limited to 324 International Students with a greater female participation rate and a lack of representation from non-binary and gender diverse students.

Conclusion and recommendations

International Students require enhanced access to University of Melbourne support services to achieve an engaged and healthy educational experience. We have identified nine recommendations that need to be adopted at the University with the support of relevant stakeholders, such as UMSU and GSA:

Recommendation 1: Increase awareness and provide clear information to International Students using innovative ways to channel the message.

Recommendation 2: Review the University counselling service for all students and ensure International Student needs are met with reduced waitlists and increased external support.

Recommendation 3: Increase support services and wellbeing programs for all offshore International Students as deemed appropriate.

Recommendation 4: Recognise cultural and ethnic diversity by providing students the option of consulting with bilingual staff in sensitive support services, including counselling, health, and safety programs.

Recommendation 5: Incorporate cultural competency training within support services to ensure inclusive and culturally informed output.

Recommendation 6: Increase International Students' opportunities to meet peers and form community connections by increasing University funding to graduate groups and student-focused programs. Student unions, including GSA, can similarly increase funding for social support programs.

Recommendation 7: Continue to advocate for improved mental and sexual health services by championing student-led engagement that raises awareness about International Student challenges.

Recommendation 8: Offer ongoing professional development to staff to meet the diverse needs of International Students.

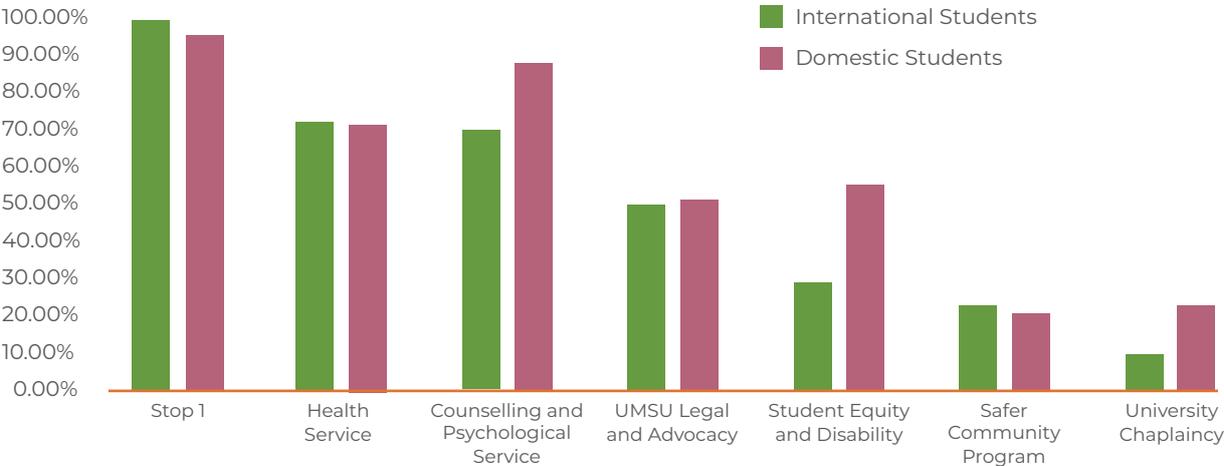
Recommendation 9: Ensure University of Melbourne staff embed feedback from students and conduct regular evaluations to improve services.

References

- Beasy, K, Kriewaldt, J, Trevethan, H, Morgan, A and Cowie, B 2020, 'Multiperspectivism as a Threshold Concept in Understanding Diversity and Inclusion for Future Teachers', *Australian Educational Researcher*, vol. 47, no. 5, pp. 893-909.
- Coroners Court of Victoria 2019, *Coroner warns of barriers to mental health support for international students*, accessed from <<https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/coroner-warns-barriers-mental-health-support-international-students>>.
- Diekelmann N and Mikol C 2003, 'Teacher talk: new pedagogies for nursing. Knowing and connecting: competing demands and creating student-friendly and teacher-friendly nursing curricula', *Journal of Nursing Education*, vol. 42, no. 9, pp. 385-389.
- Dovchin, S 2020, 'The Psychological Damages of Linguistic Racism and International Students in Australia', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, vol. 23, no. 7, pp. 804-818.
- Eddie, R and Hall, B 2 June 2021, Casual workers, foreign students struggle through another lockdown, *The Age*, accessed from <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/casual-workers-foreign-students-struggle-through-another-lockdown-20210602-p57xad.html>>.
- Farbenblum, B and Berg, L 2020, "'We might not be citizens but we are still people": Australia's disregard for the human rights of international students during COVID-19', *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 486-506.
- Graduate Student Association (GSA) University of Melbourne 2021, Student Resilience Project, accessed from <<https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/student-resilience-project-final-report.pdf>>.
- Kinsella, Elise 17 May 2020, International students in hardship due to coronavirus a 'looming humanitarian crisis', advocates say, *ABC News Australia*, accessed from <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-17/international-students-facing-homeless-during-coronavirus/12248260>>.
- Larkins, Frank 2018, Male Students Remain Underrepresented in Australian Universities. *Should Australia be concerned?*, The University of Melbourne, accessed from <https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0012/2894718/Gender-Enrolment-Trends-F-Larkins-Sep-2018.pdf>.
- Lim, B 2021, *CISA Stranded Students Survey Outcome*, Council of International Students Australia (CISA), accessed from <<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1G5rAz8nwSciRP9EuoyJJ5eAFz20Y1VO1/view>>.
- Ma, S, Zhu, Y and Bresnahan, M 2021, 'Chinese International Students' Face Concerns, Self-Stigma, Linguistic Factors, and Help-Seeking Intentions for Mental Health', *Health Communication*, pp. 1-9.
- Poljski, C, Quiazon, R and Tran, C 2014, 'Ensuring Rights: Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services for Female International Students in Australia', *Journal of International Students*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 150-163.
- Ross, B, Ta, B and Grieve, A 2019, 'Placement Educators' Experiences and Perspectives of Supervising International Social Work Students in Australia', *Australian Social Work*, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 188-205.
- Russell, J, Thomson, G and Rosenthal, D 2008, 'International student use of university health and counselling services', *Higher Education* (00181560), vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 59-75.
- Skromanis, S, Cooling, N, Rodgers, B, Purton, T, Fan, F, Bridgman, H, Harris, K, Presser, J & Mond, J 2018, 'Health and Well-Being of International University Students, and Comparison with Domestic Students, in Tasmania, Australia', *International journal of environmental research and public health*, vol. 15, no. 6.
- UMSU International 2021, *International Student Survey 2020 Report*, accessed from <<https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/International-Student-Survey-2020-Report-MAR-2021.pdf>>.
- University of Melbourne 2021, *English Language Requirements*, accessed from <<https://study.unimelb.edu.au/how-to-apply/english-language-requirements>>.
- Wille, J 2011, 'Agency and belonging: Southern Sudanese Former Refugees' reflections on life in Australia', *Australasian Review of African Studies*, The, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 80-100.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Figure 3: Comparative Student Awareness of University Support Services



Note. International Students (n=324), Domestic Students (n=312)