

Voices From The Margins

RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

Acknowledgment of Country

RMIT PlaceLab acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

RMIT PlaceLab respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present, as the original and continuing Makers of Place.

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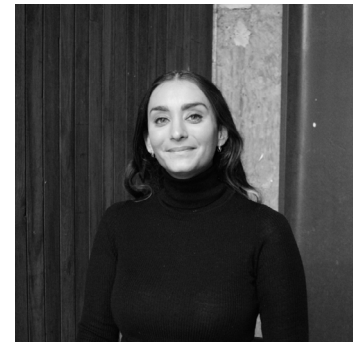
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RMIT PlaceLab initiative

RMIT PlaceLab is a new urban initiative connecting community, shaping place and taking a radically different approach to research.

Designed to free research from the campus and bring researchers street-side to connect with local government and groups, RMIT PlaceLab facilitates site-based research to support the co-creation of new ideas, partnerships, and systems that grow positive community impact.

Dynamic, actionable and accessible, RMIT PlaceLab research projects are bite-size and community-engaged, generating insights, ideas and solutions that can be implemented together with our government and place-making partners.

Voices From The Margins Research Project

Key research themes and issues of social connectedness, emotional wellbeing, and access to services, important to the RMIT PlaceLab initiative, led to the collaborative project **Voices From The Margins** with academics from RMIT's School of Global, Urban and Social Studies including Assoc. Professor Robyn Martin and Dr. Sonia Martin.

Voices From The Margins examines the experiences of international students during and post-Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdown period and presents recommendations from international students to improve their wellbeing and lived experience in Melbourne. The global pandemic highlighted the difficulties faced by Melbourne's international student population and the damaging impact commodification has had on their experience of Melbourne. The better practical support offered to international students by countries such as New Zealand and Canada in response to the pandemic has put a spotlight on Australia's competitiveness to attract and retain international students.

While the research recognises the contribution of international students to the Victorian economy, it aims to understand the lived experiences and improve the wellbeing of international students so their social and cultural contributions to education providers and the city can be maximised in a post-COVID Melbourne.

Academic Researchers

Dr Christine Craik, Associate Professor Robyn Martin (co-lead), Dr Sonia Martin (co-lead), and Amina Hadziomerovic, research assistant and international PhD student.

Other researchers who supported the project team included Dr Christina David, Dr Kathy Edwards, Associate Professor Ronnie Egan and Dr Juliet Watson.

Student Researchers

Zhuotong (Cecilia) Lui, Bachelor of Social Work international student, Kathleen Sityar, Master of Social Work international student, and Jamie Van, Bachelor of Social Work international student.

A reference group supported the research with members representing a diverse range of views and experiences. Members included past and current international students, key staff involved in international student matters within RMIT University, Study Melbourne, City of Melbourne and community members with a specific interest in the wellbeing of international students.

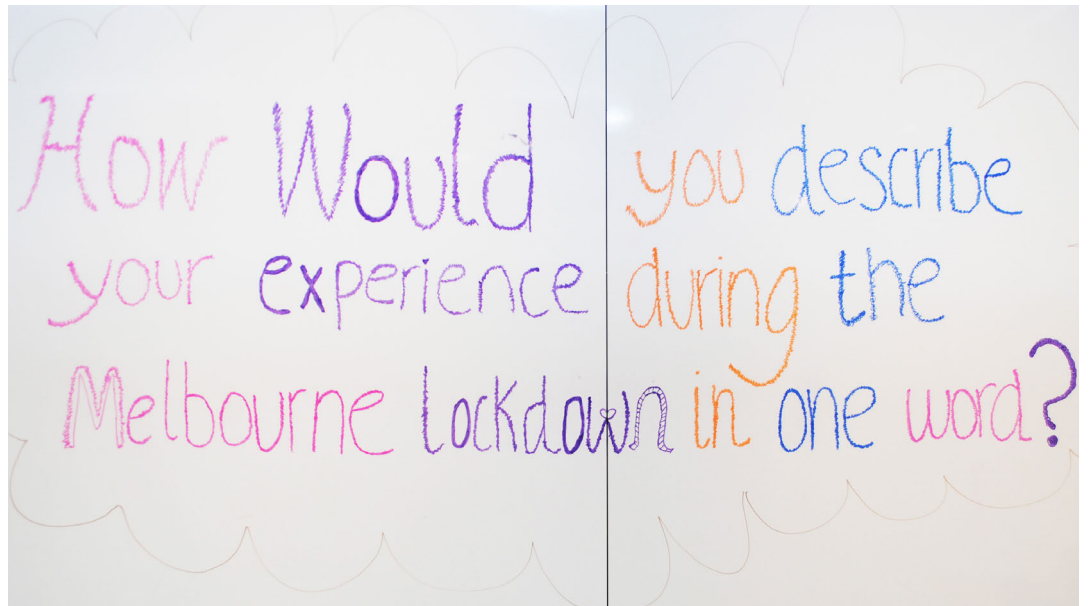
Working with stakeholders, including the City of Melbourne and Study Melbourne, we designed a small-scale study focusing on international student experiences of marginalisation and inclusion in Melbourne during, and following, the COVID-19 lockdowns.

On the 11th of March 2020 the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic (WHO 2020) which affected the health and wellbeing of populations across the globe. University students were among the many groups impacted and international students have encountered distinctive challenges and little in the way of government support. Then Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, advised international students studying in Australia to 'go home' to 'receive the supports that are available... in their home countries' (Gibson and Moran 2020; Ross 2020a in Oanh and Nguyen 2020: 1372). This reinforced an existing view that international students were little more than 'cash cows' who provided significant value to the Australian economy. International student circumstances were compounded by uncertainty, anxiety, racism and fears for the wellbeing of family and friends in their home country, and that of their own health and wellbeing, while seeking to maintain academic progress (Fronek et al. 2021).

In Melbourne, the state government introduced a raft of mobility and commercial restrictions to limit the spread of COVID-19. Measures included closing school and university campuses and moving all teaching online, closing 'non-essential' retail stores and other services, curfews, and home isolation. During 2020-2021 there were a total of six 'lockdowns' and Melbourne recorded one of the longest periods of lockdowns in the world (ABC 3 October 2021). These restrictions amplified the challenges most international students were already facing and highlighted the reliance by the higher education sector on the economic contribution of international students. To illustrate the economic significance of international student funding, modelling by Universities Australia showed that by 2023, universities could lose A\$16 billion due to the loss of international student fees (Hurley 2021). International students who were unable to leave, enter or return, experienced exacerbated isolation and disconnection.

In response to the limited recognition of international students, the City of Melbourne, universities and other relevant groups identified the need for strategies that acknowledged their experiences, and their social and cultural contributions. It is within this context that our project was developed. Working with stakeholders, including the City of Melbourne and Study Melbourne, we designed a small-scale study focusing on international student experiences of marginalisation and inclusion in Melbourne during, and following, the COVID-19 lockdowns. We asked international students to share their experiences and to contribute their ideas about how Melbourne could be more inclusive.

Drawing on participatory methods, the project engaged international students as both lived experience researchers and stakeholder advisers throughout the research process. The study comprised a range of empirical components which included: an online survey, a focus group and face-to-face interviews undertaken individually and in groups.



Question prompt for the Voices From The Margins focus group at RMIT PlaceLab Melbourne.

Guided by principles of collaboration and participation, international vocational and higher education students were invited to reflect on, articulate and share their experiences of inclusion and marginalisation in Melbourne from early 2020. The project received ethical approval from RMIT (2022_25631-19197). While the international student experience of isolation and cultural disconnection is established (Eg see Hasnain and Hajek 2022; Mason 2021), few research projects have positioned international students as experts on and of their experiences.

This study sought to address this gap through the membership of three international students in the research team, and a stance that privileged the lived experience of international students as reference group members and research participants. The short-term nature of the project means there is scope for further research involving deeper engagement with participatory and collaborative methods.

The Voices From the Margins Research Project was based on the following Research Questions:

- **What are the lived experiences of RMIT international students of marginalisation within the City of Melbourne?**
- **What are the lived experiences of RMIT international students of inclusion within the City of Melbourne?**
- **How have COVID-19 lockdowns and the subsequent opening up of the city mediated experiences of marginalisation and inclusion?**
- **What strategies do international students recommend to increase inclusion and decrease marginalisation?**

Data collection involved a survey, and small focus group/individual interviews with international students. Thirty-five online surveys, one focus group (comprising three participants) and nine face-to-face interviews were completed. A further 32 students commenced the survey, but their responses were incomplete and therefore excluded from the final sample. Inclusion criteria required participants to be current Victorian international vocational or higher education international students, aged over 18 years.

The international student members of the research team provided guidance and leadership in finalising the research design, survey and interview/focus group questions, recruitment methods, data analysis and actively contributing to the reference group discussions.

The survey included 15 open-ended and multiple-choice questions on student experiences of living and studying in Melbourne during and following the COVID-19 lockdowns; as well as recommendations for making Melbourne a more inclusive place. Guided by our review of existing research, we included specific questions on the following five domains: financial; social; emotional; cultural; and housing. The anonymous online survey offered the option of indicating interest in participating in a follow-up focus group or interview. Drawing on emerging themes from the survey data, existing literature and the lived experiences of the student researchers and reference group members, the focus group and interviews sought to gather more in-depth information. Additional topics included healthcare, access to information and migration policy.

For further information on the engagement and data collection process, please refer to the Appendix.



Student Researchers preparing to facilitate Voices From The Margins focus group at RMIT PlaceLab Melbourne.

This research project has identified that international students experience a range of vulnerabilities across a number of domains which were exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions.

We present findings from combined analyses of the survey, the focus group and individual interviews, highlighting key themes.

The project had a diverse sample with most participants identifying as female and aged between 18 and 34 years. The participants were enrolled across vocational education, undergraduate, postgraduate and higher degrees by research programs.

Participants represented a range of culturally and ethnically diverse communities including China, the Philippines, South Africa, Peru, Chile, Poland, Colombia, and Sri Lanka.

The research findings are presented according to several key theme areas related to the student experience during and post-COVID-19 restrictions across, key domains including:

- **Emotional Wellbeing**
- **Financial**
- **Education and Employment**
- **Social Connection**
- **Racism**
- **Housing**
- **Health**
- **Visas and Migration**
- **Access to Information**

The study has identified that international students experience a range of vulnerabilities across these domains and these were exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions.

Emotional wellbeing either underpins or informs most of the issues reported in these findings. For example, financial pressure, social isolation, subtle and overt discrimination, being away from family and friends, employment concerns and not being able to navigate key information at one's educational institution directly informed and was impacted by emotional wellbeing. Like other themes, these issues existed prior to, but were exacerbated by COVID-19. Other longstanding issues impacting on emotional wellbeing included language confidence, understanding academic requirements, cultural norms, family expectations, family sacrifices made for the student to study abroad, concern about the high rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths in their home country, leaving children in their home country and the pressure of caring for children while an international student in Australia. Strict visa timelines were reported to increase the pressure students felt, particularly if they failed a subject.

The issue of mental health received attention from participants who reported a general discomfort with dominant, "western" ideas about and responses to mental distress, particularly as for many, they belonged to collectivist cultural groups. This meant individualised responses like counselling were unfamiliar. Other participants spoke of cultural stigma associated with mental distress, which left them uncomfortable to seek assistance in Australia. The issue of information and knowing who to approach or seek help from was paramount in this theme.

COVID-19 restrictions significantly worsened the emotional wellbeing of most study participants. Many reported feeling abandoned and isolated, particularly as the opportunity to connect with friends, students and colleagues was curtailed. This meant students had little to no connection and their emotional wellbeing suffered as a result. This, coupled with COVID-19 related impacts such as loss of employment and financial strain left students feeling hopeless. For the students who were in their home country and studying online, issues such as little support from their educational institution, different time zones and unreliable internet access also impacted wellbeing.

The research found that the emotional wellbeing and associated impacts were amplified for higher degree by research students who were typically already isolated due to the nature of their study (i.e., individual project). In addition to the issues already identified, these participants reported a high mental health toll amongst their friends and the need to support each other, yet not knowing where to turn for external or formal assistance.

In contrast, a small group of students said that the COVID-19 restrictions had strengthened their resilience and emotional capacity. The following is a participant's reflection on how difficult the period was, yet how it also assisted them to develop a different outlook:

“ Horrific, anxious, toxically work driven in the name of financial survival and hopeless. But, reflective over myself as a person, past mistakes and other aspects in life that I took for granted.”

4.2 Financial

Financial concerns, stressors and problems were persistent and ongoing experiences for participants, reaching back before COVID-19 and continuing post restrictions. Specific concerns included the high cost of tuition fees and housing, costs of living and paying full price for goods and services due to concession ineligibility. In response, students work often multiple part-time jobs, impacting their capacity to study. One student described the unrelenting nature of this situation:

“ It is like a vicious cycle. You need money so you take a million casual jobs, and you need so much money to pay off the tuition fees, then you have housing and utilities, and you need to work, but of course, the more you work, the more your school performance suffers. And it never ends.”

In relation to the cost of living, transport was a common concern for the participants. International students not qualifying for public transport concessions, coupled with many students living considerable distances from the city to save on housing costs, placed them in a difficult position and meant not attending their place of study. This shows that the need to work long hours to meet housing costs, along with transport costs, disrupts the amount of time spent studying and likely impacts academic progress.

COVID-19 exacerbated the financial stressors reported by students, with participants losing employment and income as businesses closed due to lockdown restrictions. Cost of living pressures were reported to be more acute during this period and some students chose to limit their heating during colder months in order to reduce utility costs.

It was found that the students' country of origin also played a part in increasing financial strain. The example of Sri Lanka imposing caps on the amount of money that could be sent outside the country was reported, noting this caused substantial financial stress and difficulty for students in Australia. Another COVID-19 related concern raised by students was that while classes moved online during lockdowns, the tuition fees remained the same. The participants felt fee relief should have been provided as the quality of their educational experience was compromised.

4.3 Education and Employment

The educational challenges associated with being an international student pre-COVID-19 increased with lockdowns. Factors such as previous qualifications not being recognised, being marginalised and treated as the 'other' in classrooms, and having limited opportunities to socialise with domestic students were identified in this study. Accessing information relevant to international students from education providers and governments was a particular issue that is discussed further in Section 4.9 'Access to Information', but it was noted that sources such as 'frequently asked questions', information bots and complicated websites had little to offer. Students said they needed to speak to a person who would patiently deal with their queries and who could be relied upon to consistently respond. Accessing academic support was also difficult, with students saying information was confusing and unclear. Further, some students said that through involvement with work integrated learning schemes (from being interviewed to being placed) they were made to feel like the 'other', with a sense that international students are treated differently to domestic students.

When it comes to employment, we have already reported the need for students to work many hours, often in multiple jobs. Students reported discrimination by employers, who could exploit the students' economic and social vulnerabilities. This frequently manifested in refusing to employ students who at the time of this study, were not permitted to work more than 20 hours per week:

“ Employers are well familiar with our visa conditions, and to get rid of us, in job ads they put 22 hours weekly. They know we are limited to 20 hours per week. When we ask them, can we work 20, that is not a huge difference, they say no, 22 is crucial, nothing less. How obvious is it that they just don't want to deal with our accents.”

4.4 Social Connection

The sense of being the 'other' in education extended to other social settings prior to and post COVID-19 restrictions. Participants spoke of their hopes while planning to become an international student in Australia, which included meeting and building connections with domestic students and other community members. The reality reported by participants, however, was of limited experiences of socialisation and connection with community outside of their own cultural connections. Instead, these students were often socially isolated and reported that their confidence was negatively impacted. This affected students testing out and strengthening their language skills and created a heightened self-consciousness around having an accent or being 'different' in classrooms, work and other settings. Students also reported that they experienced subtle and overt racism in the classroom and community.

COVID-19 restrictions further reinforced international students' lack of social connection. Enforced isolation, online learning, limited mobility, decreased opportunities for socialisation through work and study, the inability to visit family overseas, and for those in student housing the inability to access common areas had major impacts on the participants. Some told us that these experiences continue to impact their willingness to interact post lock-down. Our data shows concerns with social connectedness were more likely to be reported by female identifying participants. A small number of students did however report that online classes were not as socially isolating as in-person workshops and tutorials.



Many participants reported feelings of social isolation and a lack of connection to their community.

4.5 Racism

As previously noted, participants in this research reported experiences of racism, discrimination and othering in study, work and the broader community. Students reported feeling frustrated at being perceived as incompetent, through both their language skills and any existing qualifications from their country of origin being perceived as lesser than those in Australia. These experiences pre-dated COVID-19 restrictions and have continued. Of concern were reports from Asian students that they experienced racism as they were framed as responsible for the virus outbreak and seen as potential carriers.

4.6 Housing

Housing affordability was frequently identified as a problem by participants. Another area of concern was the false advertising of housing. Participants reported arranging to view accommodation which did not reflect the photos they had seen prior to the inspection. When students queried this with the housing provider, they were told it was 'standard Aussie housing'; inferring the student was at fault for questioning the discrepancy between the advertised and actual standard of the housing.

Other examples included housing providers (usually a solo operator, not companies) exploiting the issue of limited quality housing stock, by running 'scams' where they advertise housing on social media, accepting the student deposits but there was no housing available. As one student explained:

“ My experience teaches me rental markets and property agents are really vices of the Melbourne city.”

These issues relate directly to difficulty in accessing information and limited support for students before and upon arrival in Australia. Consequently, students had limited understanding of their rights, and community standards in housing. Students reported increased financial difficulties arising from rental costs, and for those living in substandard conditions, there were impacts on their emotional wellbeing. Our findings highlight that COVID-19 restrictions further increased housing vulnerability for international students.

4.7 Healthcare

Prior to and post-COVID-19 restrictions, participants reported difficulty navigating healthcare systems. Many were unaware of the limitations of their health insurance policy prior to coming to Australia. The costs associated with health care insurance were prohibitive given the other financial pressures and some students questioned the quality of the care in international student clinics. The issue of health care cover for pregnancy was raised by the project's reference group. Neurodiverse participants raised the issue of pharmaceutical claim limits and highlighted challenges associated with being restricted to one location, particularly if the student experienced concentration issues. An issue of parity was raised in that international students pay income tax, yet they have no access to Medicare. When it came to specific COVID-19 restriction related issues, participants noted the previously documented concerns about mental health.

4.8 Visas and Migration

Participants felt the substantial economic contribution they make to the Australian economy mattered little during 2020-21. The failure of government to address the visa and migration policy issues many international students were facing, reinforced a view they were not valued and were secondary to Australian citizens. Students argued for equitable healthcare and initiatives like concessions to correct this imbalance. Further, frequent changes to visa and migration policy were reported to be frustrating and confusing. Students explained that the volatility and inconsistency of the permanent residency process precludes them from making definite plans for their future. One student, for example, has been in Australia since 2016 and experienced considerable disruption across the three degrees he has studied, saying:

“ We cannot plan anything because of this inconsistency. It is the feeling of uncertainty that frustrates us.”

The closure of Australia's borders and being told “to go home” by the then Prime Minister left participants feeling they were of little value to Australia. Despite paying income tax, participants were not eligible for COVID-19-related income support. One student said:

“ The repercussions of what they (the Commonwealth government) did was far worse than COVID-19 itself. In the end, they didn’t escape the virus.”

4.9 Access to Information

The issue of access to information was a constant theme for study participants across a wide range of areas. For education institutions, this included areas such as language used in enrolment, program plans, course guides, academic support services and the structure of the institution. Concerns about access to useful information extends beyond housing, study, employment, healthcare and emotional wellbeing, to services and facilities within their educational institutions (such as events, groups, clubs, student housing and welfare services). Some students highlighted how disorientating it was to arrive in Australia without in-person support or assistance in navigating daily life. As already reported, this issue was made much worse during COVID-19 restrictions and led to compromised emotional wellbeing, exploitation and significant social isolation.

This study has reinforced that many international students experience vulnerability, exploitation, marginalisation and commodification. It has also identified how COVID-19 restrictions exacerbated these factors. Participants were asked to share their ideas for recommendations and ways forward. We have taken these ideas and integrated them with the findings in order to propose the following recommendations.

The overarching principle of our recommendations is that all action needs to value the lived experience and expertise of international students. This means any initiative, new program or response should involve international students in the design, implementation, evaluation and leadership. This needs to be more than 'consulting' international students on their experiences or opinions, it is about meaningfully and systematically ensuring that international students are valued beyond their economic contributions and that their voices are centred.

We offer the following practical strategies:

- 1 A peer developed and led 'system navigator' project is trialled to:**
 - a.** Involve international student 'peers' whose roles would be to facilitate new international student arrivals in Melbourne. These 'peers' would explain where to find information, how to decipher existing information, navigate systems and processes, and act as a 'buddy' to newly arrived international students. These paid roles would also include warm referrals and advice around services and systems.
 - b.** Establish a group of paid peer system navigators in every higher education institution and at key sites such as within the City of Melbourne and Study Melbourne to offer information and advice to international students on key issues such as housing (rights and standards), public transport, support services and finding information at one's educational institution. This could include a 'map' for international students, like those made available to international visitors. These should ideally be in highly visible sites, and welcome drop-ins, positioned as a 'one-stop-shop' style destination for information and system navigation.
 - c.** A peer developed, led, implemented and evaluated support service that responds to and promotes emotional wellbeing for international students in each educational institution. Paid peer workers would develop a program that respects and honours cultural and gendered considerations.
 - d.** A housing campaign developed and delivered in collaboration with international students that advises on housing rights and standards. The international students involved in this campaign would be paid for their work and input.
- 2 In recognition of the significant economic contributions made by international students, and noting current policy limitations:**
 - a.** Extend Medicare benefits to include international students who pay income tax.
 - b.** Extend public transport concession fares for international students.
- 3 Universities to assess their preferred Overseas Student Health Cover providers from a social justice perspective, and ensure that the policy covers all health issues, including reproductive health and pregnancy.**
- 4 International students are paid to deliver training and awareness raising to academics and educators on their lived experience of marginalisation and othering within classrooms, in order to increase awareness and promote action by academics and institutions to co-create more inclusive educational experiences for all students.**
- 5 Universities, vocational and private education providers, and the City of Melbourne to engage in advocacy efforts with state and federal governments that improves international student wellbeing.**

6. Afterword

Voices From the Margins' focus on international students' experiences during and following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period provides valuable insights and recommendations to inform education providers and government programs and policies. The pandemic has presented unique challenges for international students, such as travel restrictions, visa issues, financial strains, and social isolation. Understanding the impact of these challenges on international students' mental health, academic progress, and overall well-being can help universities and governments develop policies that better support Melbourne's international student population.

Through research findings such as these, RMIT PlaceLab proves what's possible when local community knowledge and expertise informs world-class research. Together, we're tackling real-world, urban challenges and seeking innovations that improve liveability, community resilience and connection, evolving spaces into places.

Delivering benefit for local government and partners by making research inclusive, practical and hyper-local to achieve real impact.

Acknowledgments

The **Voices From The Margins** Research Project was part of RMIT PlaceLab, an RMIT initiative, supported through the Victoria Higher Education State Investment Fund (VHESIF).

RMIT PlaceLab also wishes to thank the project participants for their time, insights and recommendations, the project's reference and advisory group members, as well as the staff at City of Melbourne and the Salvation Army's international student facility The Couch.

Ethics

This research project has been assessed and approved by the RMIT University College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN). Ethics Reference Number: 2022_25631-19197.

Research involving human participants is consistent with the guidelines contained in the Australian National statement on ethical conduct in human research and Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

Author Contributions

This report was prepared with contributions from Associate Professor Robyn Martin and Dr. Sonia Martin (Project Academic-Leads), Dr. Christine Craik, Amina Hadziomeriovic, and the RMIT PlaceLab team.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Additional Engagement and Data Collection Information

The **Voices From the Margins** research project was widely advertised through social media sites (including those of reference group members); RMIT electronic learning sites; posters placed throughout the City of Melbourne; and promotional cards handed out at key sites in Melbourne, including The Couch, an international student lounge hosted by the Salvation Army and funded by the City of Melbourne. Participation was voluntary and respondents provided consent by completing the survey and/or signing a consent form for focus group and interview data collection.

The focus group and interviews were facilitated by the Project's HDR research assistant, WIL students from the School of GUSS, and a RMIT PlaceLab team member. The focus group was held at the RMIT PlaceLab Melbourne site and interviews were conducted at The Couch. The same research questions were used in the focus group and interviews. Participants in the focus group and interviews were offered a \$50 retail gift voucher, a credited Myki card (donated by Study Melbourne), coffee vouchers, stationery and other items as thank you gestures for their contributions to the study. Reflective notes were compiled after the focus group and interviews, to aid analysis and reflexive research practice.

While not specifically asking about difficult experiences, the research team remained sensitive to any potentially distressing topics that could have arisen. The HDR research assistant and international student co-researchers' direct experiences of lockdowns and associated impacts were used mindfully and reflexively to build rapport and promote discussion. As participants from RMIT University may have known or have been known by the academic leads (Martin, Martin and Craik), they did not have access to the participant information, nor did they analyse raw data.

Quantitative data from the surveys were collated and analysed to produce descriptive statistics. Qualitative information from the open-ended questions in the survey and focus group and interviews were coded to create themes which were discussed, refined and confirmed by the academic research team. Analysis was undertaken by degree cohorts – undergraduate, postgraduate, higher degrees by research, and vocational education. Comparison across these cohorts as well as by gender revealed that the themes reported later in this document reflect participant narratives.

We hope this report sparks more important conversations.

**We'd love to hear your thoughts via:
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**Find out more about the RMIT PlaceLab initiative
and our research activity, go to:**

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