

# Voices From The Margins

SURVEY SUMMARY



## 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.

## Thank You

We would like to extend a sincere thank you to the participants of the Voices From The Margins survey. We appreciate the survey participants, their time, reflections, and recommendations, all of which have contributed to building insights for this Research Project.

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## RMIT PlaceLab

**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.

**This project was delivered in collaboration with RMIT's Social Work and Human Services Cluster within the School of Global, Urban & Social Studies.**



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## **A collaboration between RMIT researchers and international students to understand how Melbourne can be a more welcoming and inclusive city.**

The **Voices From The Margins** Research Project focused on better understanding the unique challenges faced by international students, and the distinct contributions and knowledge they bring to Melbourne. Using a participatory approach, the project combined the lived experience of the international student community with the expertise of the RMIT research team. From this, the team formed a set of recommendations for education providers and governments to improve international students' experience of living, studying, and working in Melbourne.

The project consisted of a Reference Group, a focus group and interviews conducted by domestic and international RMIT student researchers, as well as the Survey covered in this report.

## **2      Survey Summary**

Co-developed by RMIT international social work students and undertaking their Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements in conjunction with academic staff from RMIT's Social Work and Human Services Cluster, the **Voices From The Margins** survey aimed to capture international student participants' experiences during and following Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns and their recommendations on how universities and governments can improve the experiences of international students living in Melbourne. The survey was hosted online with recruitment conducted through posters, social media channels, and the RMIT PlaceLab website and through direct engagement – such as via the City of Melbourne and Salvation Army international student initiative The Couch.

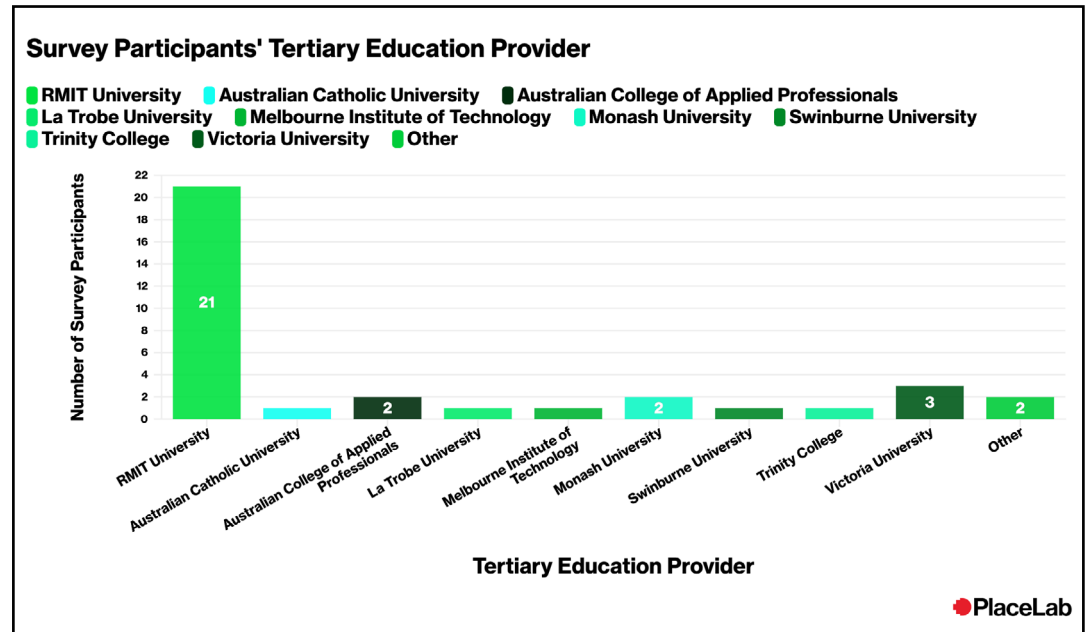
## **3      Survey Key Findings**

Key findings from the **Voices From The Margins** survey included the following insights:

- Poor access to medical and mental healthcare were the most frequently reported issues impacting international students' experience during and following the COVID-19 lockdowns.
- More financial support mechanisms, such as government payments and scholarships, were recommended to assist international students during such crises.
- In rating how they felt about their experiences during the pandemic and lockdowns, undergraduate students rated their experiences living in Melbourne the most negatively, while vocational education and postgraduate students rated their experiences the most positively.
- Difficulties navigating Australia's student and work visa programs and uncertainties concerning changing visa requirements were a prominent concern for a large number students.

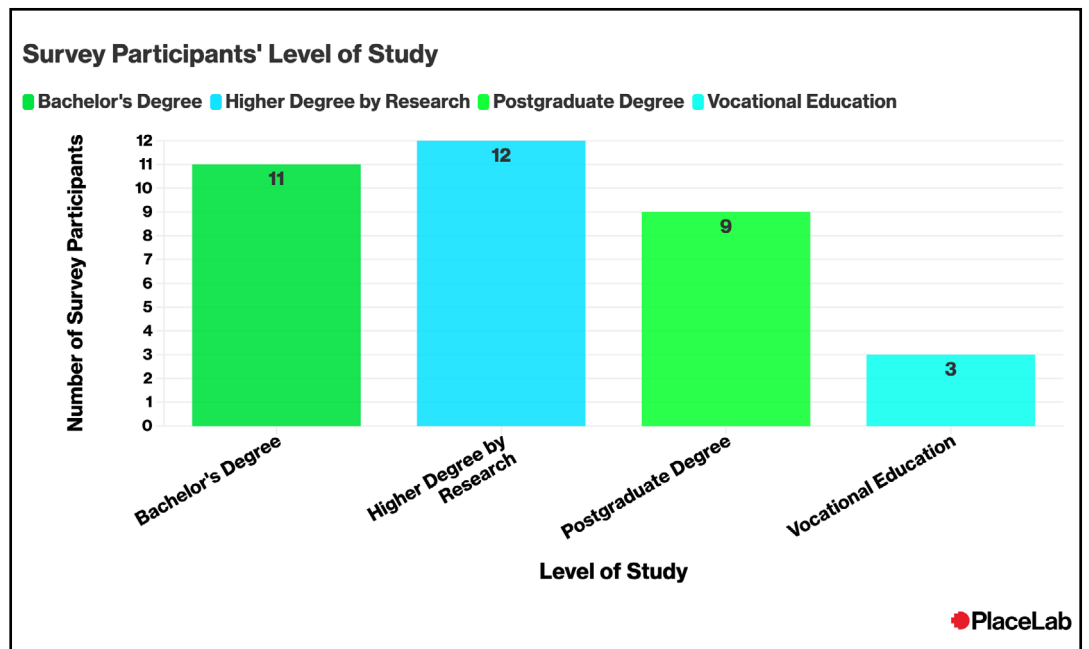
#### 4 Participant Demographic Overview

The **Voices From The Margins** survey study period took place across October to December 2022. A total of 87 participants commenced the survey. Of this 20 domestic students were ineligible and 32 international students did not complete the question, which left a total of 35 international student to fully participate in the survey.



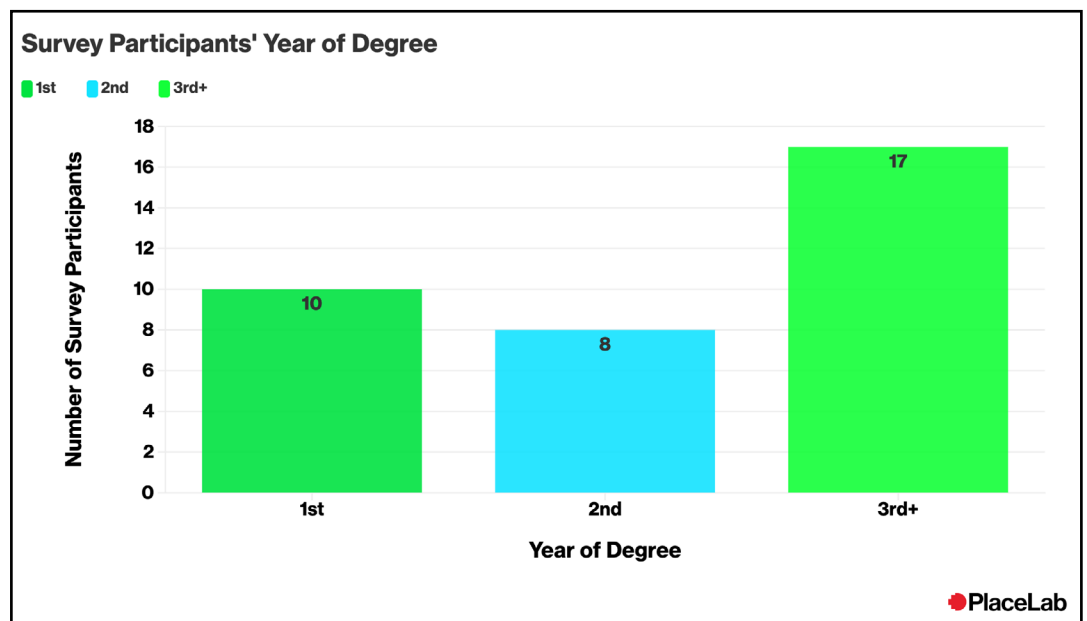
**Figure 1.** Survey Participants' Tertiary Education Provider

As detailed in Figure 1, the 35 survey participants were enrolled across more than ten different education providers. RMIT University accounted for majority of the participants (21), with the Australian College of Applied Professions, Monash University, and Victoria University the only other education providers represented by more than one survey participant.



**Figure 2a.** Survey Participants' Levels of Study

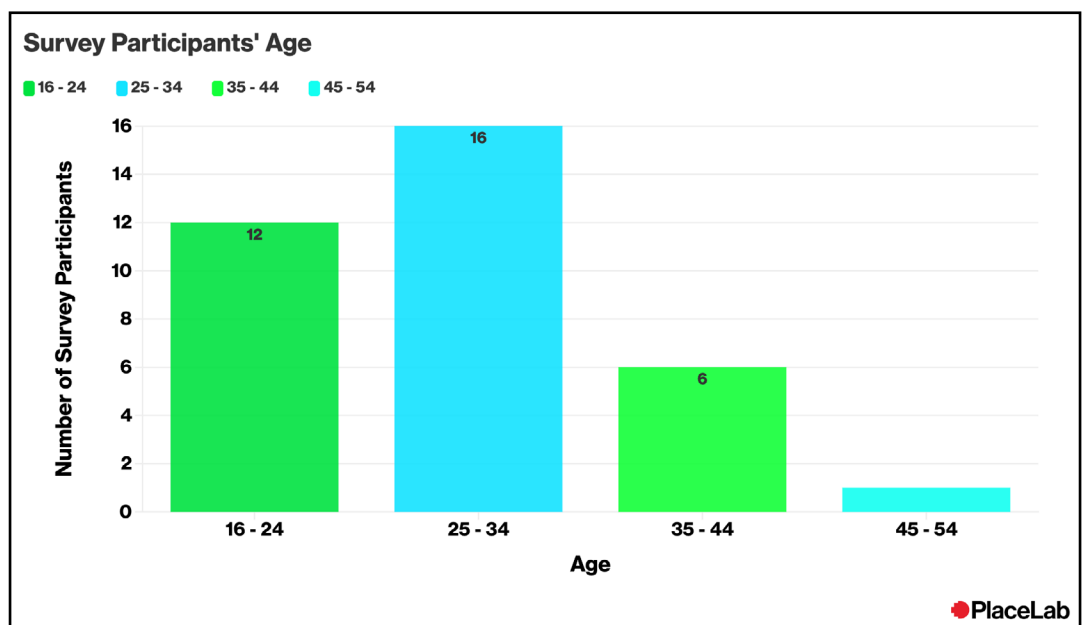
Across these education providers, majority of students were enrolled in either a Higher Degree by Research (Master's by Research or PhD) or a Bachelor Degree, as shown in Figure 2a. Vocational education (Certificate or Diploma) accounted for the lowest number of participants. As shown in Figure 2b, nearly half of the participants were in at least the third year of their course.



**Figure 2b.** Survey Participants' Year of Degree

Majority of these enrolments were full-time (33 participants), with one participant enrolled part-time and another currently taking a Leave of Absence.

Females comprised majority of the sample (21), with 13 participants identifying as male and one as non-binary/trans/gender fluid.

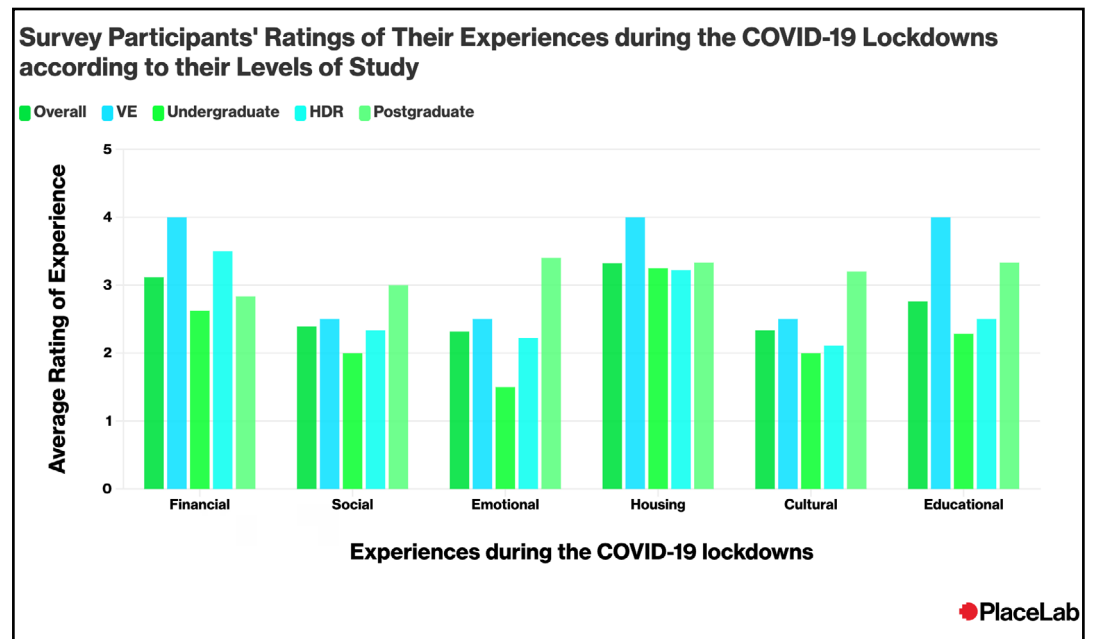


**Figure 3.** Survey Participants' Age

Figure 3 indicates the 25-34 age cohort had the highest number of participants (16), followed by 16-24 years of age (12).

## 5 Participant Lockdown Experiences

The survey participants that were present during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdown period were asked to rate their experience across six life factors. Rated on a scale from zero to five (with zero being most negative and five a most positive experience), the averages are shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Participants' Ratings of Their Experiences During Melbourne's COVID-19 Lockdowns Overall and According to Participants' Course Type

The participants generally provided similar positivity ratings for each of the six life factors. Housing and finances were the aspects of students' lives during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns were considered the most positive, while emotional, cultural, and social aspects scored the lowest. Regarding course type, undergraduate students indicated the lowest positivity averages for each aspect while the vocational education and postgraduate students generally provided the highest averages.



**Figure 5.** Bubble Chart Indicating Challenges faced by International Students during Melbourne's COVID-19 Lockdowns

Pertaining to participants' experiences during Melbourne's COVID-19 lockdowns, the results shown in Figure 5 highlight that the issues of isolation and loneliness (7 respondents) and mental health (5) were the most commonly reported. Most participants reported some negative experiences from the lock-down/ pandemic; except for one participant who indicated the opportunity for self-reflection granted by the lockdowns and another who indicated feeling suitably supported by their university.



**Figure 6.** Bubble Chart Indicating Experiences of International Students in 2022 - post Melbourne's COVID-19 Lockdowns

As detailed in Figure 6, survey participants tended to view life as an international student more positively in 2022 compared to the two preceding years during the pandemic, as detailed in Figure 6. General positive feelings (6 respondents) were the most commonly reported description, although feelings of being busy (4) and of isolation and loneliness (4) were the second most commonly reported descriptions.



**Figure 7.** Bubble Chart Indicating Differences in Life Experiences for International Students in Melbourne Between 2020-21 and 2022



When asked to consider their experiences in Melbourne in 2022, compared to the preceding two years (Figure 7), participants generally highlighted increases in opportunities, such as socialising (5 respondents), or improvements in aspects of their family life, such as conditions for parenting (2). While most participants stated an improvement in their life experience post-lockdowns compared to during lockdowns, some did indicate negative changes, such as more stress (1) and being busier (1).

Recommendations for international student support for education providers is shown in Figure 8. This survey question elicited the highest number of responses from the participants. The most common recommendations focused on financial aspects, with an increase in financial support (6 respondents) through avenues such as financial management lessons or more scholarships being the most common recommendation and lowering fees (4) the equal second most recommended item. Additional social support from the university from universities, such as organising support groups for international students (4) and mental health (4) were also amongst the other recommendations.



**Figure 8.** Recommendations for Education Providers to Better Support International Students

Below are quotes provided by participants that expand on the recommendation themes suggested by the survey results shown in Figure 8.

**“ Mental and physical health should be always prioritised, and more channels to offer social support are needed.”**

“ More could be done to create opportunities for [international] students. The easy things are done [but] do not resonate with us as internationals so we often do not feel welcomed. African students, for example, have their own cultures but some when activities are done for internationals it is not culturally inclusive, so we often do not show up for those events. Maybe you need an international office that is well represented, and inclusive of diverse continents in the world. Perhaps then will you see people come out of their shells. But for now, students will often stick to themselves because they feel isolated.”

“ The deep racism as often non-white international students are deemed as inferior and they are deemed to be ‘grateful’ for differential treatments from local students as people think they have it worse in their home country.”

The participants’ recommendations to Local, State, and Federal governments are shown in Figure 9. Financial-related support again provided the largest number of responses, with the provision of financial support (5 respondents), such as offering more scholarships, and permanently removing work hour limits for international students (4), the first and second most common recommendations.



**Figure 9.** Recommendations for Governments to Better Support International Students

Accompanying quotes below from participants provide further detail on the themes shown in Figure 9.

“ A positive narrative needs to be centralised in the academic and immigration sphere in Australia and that is the notion that Internationals or migrants are not stealing jobs and opportunities from Australians or replacing them. But, we are adding economic, spiritual, cultural, and social value to Australia in the long term.”

“ Some job opportunities and other short courses are only available to local students, so would like to see more availability and inclusion in that aspect.”

## 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, and evolve spaces into places.

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

## Acknowledgements

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.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

# Want to Get Involved?

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To find out more about the RMIT PlaceLab initiative  
and our research activity, go to:

**[placelab.rmit.edu.au](https://placelab.rmit.edu.au)**

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