

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY AWARENESS AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS A DIVERSE GROUP OF YOUNG WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

Overseas students are a diverse group in Australia (Australia Human Rights Commission, 2012). Like most Australian students, most international students also work while study (Australia Education International, 2007). The aims of this research are to explore international students' working experiences, and their awareness on OHS, including the role of the university in occupational illness and injury prevention. This research comprised of four studies in a parallel mixed methods research design.

Statistical reviews of workers' compensation data found that young workers were more likely to experience serious injuries if they were: non-Australian born, non-English speaking background, and female. The ISB 2013 survey (n=656) revealed that international students were being underpaid. Male students were more likely to be in paid employment compared to females, who were more likely to be in a voluntary job. The online survey (n=466) found international students worked in diverse kinds of job; part-time jobs, casual, and seasonal employment that is consistent with Nyland et al (2009). Lack of confidence in discussing OHS issues was a significant predictors of injury. The FGD (3 groups, n=21) found that international students had multiple reasons to work while studying. Besides earning money, improving their English, adapting to Australian culture and making friends were cited as other reasons to work. There were mixed views regarding OHS and it tended to be shaped by students' experiences and study backgrounds. This study suggested that the role of the University was to education in order to improve international students' awareness on OHS. However, this could never replace specific on-the-job training provided by employers.

In conclusion, international students have lack of OHS awareness. Universities are effectively sponsors of students into the local community, but have a limited awareness of their contribution to the local workforce. A series of recommendations are made for the universities, OHS regulators, ISB providers and future researchers.

Keywords: Australia, International students, OHS awareness, recommendations, Vulnerabilities

Introduction

In Australia, overseas students are a diverse group. The characteristics of international students in Australia, as defined by Australia Human Rights Commission (2012), are diverse in ages and stages of lives, travel to Australia alone and/or with family members, marital status varied, and they stay in Australia for diverse period lengths of time depend on the type of their study. The study programs attended by international students in Australia includes students exchange programs, English language courses, and higher education courses. The higher education programs include diplomas, undergraduate, master and doctorate programs. International students in Australia come from all parts of the world including Asia, Europe, Africa, Middle East, as well as from South and North America. The majority of students come from China, India, and Malaysia (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014).

The Australian Education International defines international students as full-fee paying students studying in Australia on a student visa (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) and they are classified into five sectors. The first, Higher Education, consists of undergraduate and postgraduate university students. The second is Vocational Education and Training (VET) within Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and related institutes. The third category is School, which includes kindergarten, primary, and secondary (junior and senior) students. English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) is the fourth category. Finally, the 'Other' category comprises courses outside the above categories, such as foundation courses, non-award and enabling courses. Especially

in the higher education sector, around one in five students in Australian universities is an international student (Norton, 2014).

At the end of 2008, approximately 519,000 international students were registered in Australia and this number was 20% higher compared to the previous year (Nyland et al., 2009). In 2011, there were reportedly 557,425 international students enrolled in Australia (Pejic, 2012). Furthermore, between 1997 and 2010, Australia educated over 4 million international students (Australian Education International, 2011). Data from the University of Adelaide website in 2015 revealed that the number of international students' enrolled increased from 6,955 students in 2013 to 7,286 in 2014 (The University of Adelaide, 2015).

The aims of this research are to explore international students' working experiences, and their awareness on OHS, including the role of the university in occupational illness and injury prevention.

Methods

This research comprised of four studies in a parallel mixed methods research design that combines quantitative and qualitative studies. The research comprises three quantitative studies and one qualitative study.

1. *Injury claims experience from South Australian Workers Compensation data (2004-2013)*. For the purpose of this statistical review, an international student was defined as a worker between the ages of 15-24 years who was non-Australian born and of non-English speaking background.
2. *Secondary data analysis from International Student Barometer (ISB) Survey working experience from the 2013 University of Adelaide*. The survey was

run on a regular basis to gauge perceptions and to improve services for enrolled international students.

3. *An online questionnaire survey of international students at the University of Adelaide.* This was designed to explore working experiences, injury experiences and work-study interference.
4. *A qualitative study using focus group study of international students at the University of Adelaide.* This explored the perceived current practice of OHS education in the University and its potential injury-preventive role for work outside of the University.

Results

Statistical reviews of workers' compensation data found that young workers were more likely to experience serious injuries if they were: non-Australian born, non-English speaking background, and female. Young workers were more likely to experience serious injuries if they were: Non-Australian born, Odds Ratio (OR) = 1.20 (CI: 1.07-1.35); Non-English speaking background (NESB), OR= 1.38 (CI: 1.09-1.76); Older young workers (20-24 yr old), OR =1.38 (1.29-1.47); Female, OR =1.51 (1.41-1.61); Outdoor workers OR= 1.87 (1.73-2.02). These data are consistent with international students being at greater risk compared to local young workers.

The ISB 2013 survey (n=656) revealed that international students were being underpaid. Male students were more likely to be in paid employment compared to females, who were more likely to be in a voluntary job.

From online survey, the study (n=466) found international students worked in part-time jobs (55.3%), casual (39.2%) and seasonal employment (5.4%). The majority were engaged in restaurants (42.1%), supermarkets or grocery stores (21.1%) and in cleaning jobs (12.6%). Sixty percent reported that they did not receive any OHS training before commencing the work and 10% reported that they had experienced an injury in an Australian workplace. Of those with OHS training, 43% experienced injury after the training. About 65% of students felt that work adversely impacted on study, with tiredness being the main form of interference.

Injury experience and perceptions of work-study interference were modelled with logistic regression. Significant predictors of injury were working 20 hours or more per week, adjusted odds ratio (AOR) = 2.20 (CI: 1.03-4.71); lack of confidence in discussing OHS issues, AOR = 2.17 (CI: 1.13-4.16); a perception of unfair wages or feeling exploited, AOR = 2.42 (CI: 1.24-4.71); and being a second year student in either undergraduate or postgraduate programs, AOR = 2.69 (CI: 1.04-6.96). For work-study interference, the corresponding variables were working 20 hours or more per week, OR=1.91 (CI: 1.08-3.41); a perception of unfair wages, OR=1.89 (CI: 1.31-2.75); being a second year student, OR= 1.80 (CI: 1.02-3.18); being a holder of a partial scholarship, OR=1.98 (CI: 1.14-3.43); and lack of confidence in discussing OHS issues, OR=2.05 (CI: 1.41-2.99).

The FGD (3 groups, n=21) found that international students had multiple reasons to work while studying. Besides earning money, improving their English, adapting to Australian culture and making friends were cited as other reasons to work. There were mixed views regarding OHS and it tended to be shaped by students' experiences and study backgrounds. There were mixed experiences

relating to work-study interference. Some participants revealed that they had experienced negative impacts of long working hours on study. However, other students argued that there was reduced impact when the jobs were flexible, were undertaken in a vacation period, on the weekends, or when the working hours did not exceed 20 hours a week. Similarly, there were mixed views regarding OHS. Some participants were not concerned about the risks, even if they understood the hazard.

Student perspectives on OHS training and education tended to be shaped by their experiences and study backgrounds. With regard to the current University of Adelaide practices on OHS education, it was found that there was a different emphasis between the schools of engineering and social sciences. The participants recalled OHS information and education being provided but felt that this tended to focus on student security and safety around the University environment. Participants felt that there was little or no consideration of work outside of the University. Some suggested that the institutional concern about students' working life should be raised from "zero" to "hero". The University should better prepare international students to work in the community as part of its social responsibility and duty of care. The role of the University was to provide generic or basic knowledge such as workers' rights and responsibilities. However, this could never replace specific on-the-job training provided by employers.

Conclusions

International students as diverse group of young workers are in a greater risk to experience injury in the workplace compare to local students. They have lack of OHS awareness. Universities are effectively sponsors of students into the local community, but have a limited awareness of their contribution to the local workforce. This study suggested that the role of the University was to education in order to improve international students' awareness on OHS. However, this could never replace specific on-the-job training provided by employers. A series of recommendations are made for the universities, OHS regulators, ISB providers and future researchers.

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