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Working While Learning: International Students' Rights, Realities, and Challenges in Australian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: *Many international students engage in paid employment while studying. This research explores the employment experiences, working conditions, and understandings of the workplace rights of international students in Australia. Semistructured interviews were conducted with ten international students aged over 18 years who were enrolled in an Australian higher*

education institution. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were identified: navigating employment; awareness, knowledge, and ability to act on workplace rights; and financial challenges. Participants typically worked because of financial necessity and often had limited awareness of their workplace rights. Many were reluctant to report unfair treatment because they feared job loss or visa consequences and experienced cultural norms that discouraged them from speaking out. The findings suggest that some employers might be hesitant to hire international students, influenced by visa restrictions and cultural perceptions. The study highlights the need for employers, universities, and policymakers to be better supported in asserting their workplace rights and accessing fair employment opportunities.

Keywords: Australia, employment, human rights, international students, qualitative

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INTRODUCTION

International education is Australia's third-largest export industry, with significant effects on both the national economy and the higher education sector (Hong et al., 2023). Beyond its considerable economic impact, the cultural and social capital contributed by international students has enriched both Australian universities and Australian society. However, studying in Australia presents substantial financial challenges, with students required to demonstrate significant savings to meet visa requirements, the requirement to pay higher tuition fees than domestic students, and navigating one of the world's highest costs of living. These pressures often compel students to seek employment to support themselves, which can lead to stress and diminished academic performance.

Employment offers valuable experience and professional connections; however, many international students engage in paid work out of financial necessity. Despite having equal workplace rights under Australian law, international students frequently face barriers to fair employment, including visa restrictions, limited English proficiency, and discriminatory hiring practices (Department of Home Affairs, 2024b). These factors often confine international students to casual or low-skilled jobs, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.

Some research has explored the poor workplace conditions faced by international students. However, as Clibborn (2021) argues, this issue remains underexplored, particularly in the context of the growing global population of students engaging in part-time employment. This research aims to explore the employment experiences of international students who are engaged with Australian higher education. By exploring the lived experiences of international students, this research aims to deepen the understanding of the barriers they face, their knowledge and awareness of employment rights, the strategies they adopt to

navigate workplace challenges, and the broader implications for their educational engagement and personal wellbeing.

Background

International student enrollments in Australia have surged in recent years, from 452,950 in 2014 (Department of Education and Training, 2015) to 498,170 in November 2024 (Department of Education, 2025). While the increase in international students' choice of Australia as a study destination is an indication of the esteem of higher education in Australia, the opportunity to study in Australia comes with significant financial challenges. As part of the student visa application process, applicants must demonstrate access to at least AUD \$29,710 in savings to meet financial self-sufficiency requirements (Department of Home Affairs, 2024a). This considerable amount of cash at hand is in addition to the significantly higher tuition fees paid by international students than domestic students (Ziguras & Croucher, 2023). In addition, Australia ranks among the top ten countries in terms of the cost of living per person (World Population Review, 2024). In 2022, the top three countries of origin for international students in Australia were China, India, and Nepal (Dos Santos et al., 2024), all of which have significantly lower living costs than Australia (World Bank Group, 2021). These financial pressures can make it difficult for international students to financially sustain themselves, despite the required demonstration of cash on hand, without seeking additional sources of income. According to the 2012 International Student Survey of more than 37,000 students enrolled at Australian universities, approximately 41% were involved in paid work (Lawson, 2014). Even for those who receive a scholarship or financial support from their families, part-time employment is a common experience for international students (Roitman et al., 2024).

Access to employment opportunities is a key factor that influences international students' choice of Australia as a study destination. The most recent survey by the International Student Survey in 2014 revealed that 76% of 18,730 international higher education students surveyed considered the ability to work while studying a key factor in choosing Australia as their study destination (Department of Education and Training, 2015). These findings highlight not only the financial necessity of employment for many international students but also the strategic importance of work opportunities in shaping their educational choices. Australia's workplace laws ensure that all workers, regardless of their citizenship or visa status, are entitled to the same basic rights and protections (Department of Home Affairs, 2024b). International students have the same workplace rights as domestic workers (Study Australia, 2024). These legal protections encompass a range of entitlements, including the national minimum wage, the right to receive pay slips, and working hour restrictions (Department of Home Affairs, 2024b). However, in practice, international students face a range of employment obstacles that can place them at risk of exploitation (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020). Aspects that contribute to this risk include language barriers, host country attitudes,

workplace discrimination, the acceptance of poor working conditions, limited knowledge of workplace rights, and broader social and practical constraints. International students may arrive in Australia with limited proficiency in English, which can leave students vulnerable to workplace exploitation, with language barriers closely linked to experiences of underpayment. Extending the findings of the 2019 nationwide survey, Farbenblum and Berg (2020) reported that students who self-reported fair or poor English experienced significantly worse pay outcomes. More than 90% of these students earn below the casual minimum wage of \$22 per hour, with 67% earning less than the base minimum of \$18 and nearly 40% receiving half or less of the minimum wage, which is twice the rate observed among those with good or very good English proficiency (Farbenblum & Berg, 2020). For example, ethnic Chinese students living in Australia with limited English proficiency often struggle to access legal employment options, leading them to be vulnerable to employers who offer wages below the legal minimum, assuming that they are unlikely to report exploitation to authorities such as the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) or labor unions (Li, 2017). Language barriers restrict international students' access to suitable employment and increase their vulnerability to exploitation within the Australian labor market.

Employers in Australia have been found to be reluctant to employ international students. This reluctance may be influenced by negative public perceptions of international students' communication skills and cultural compatibility, including a belief that they lack cultural competence in both the classroom and the workplace (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020). Employers highlight limited English proficiency, inadequate soft skills, visa restrictions, and a lack of local work experience as reasons for excluding international graduates (Blackmore et al., 2017), a practice that can significantly undermine international students' access to fair employment. Reluctance may be further compounded by employer doubts about international students' long-term commitment to the Australian workforce, where there is employer hesitation to invest in hiring and training an international student who may return home at any time (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020). Other research has highlighted concerns regarding the administrative burden, cost, and paperwork involved in sponsoring work visas for international students (McFadden & Seedorff, 2017). Together, these negative perceptions and institutional practices create significant barriers to fair employment for international students and reinforce systemic inequities in recruitment practices.

International students commonly report experiences of workplace discrimination in Australia, particularly in the form of marginalization and unequal treatment (Tran & Hoang, 2020). A qualitative study of international accounting graduates in Australia revealed that employers view international graduates through a racialized lens, perceiving them as lacking English proficiency, communicative competence, and proactive learning behaviors expected in the Australian professional context (Blackmore et al., 2017). International students are often stigmatized as "PR hunters" (permanent residency), viewed as individuals who are primarily interested in obtaining citizenship in Australia. This perception contributes to the experience of injustice,

discrimination, and marginalization (Tran & Hoang, 2020) and a lack of feelings of belonging (Cena et al., 2021). Such perceptions and discriminatory attitudes not only affect international students' access to employment opportunities but also contribute to a situation in which poor working conditions are normalized and accepted as part of the international student experience.

International students often enter the workforce under conditions that leave them vulnerable to exploitation and are more likely to accept poor working conditions compared to domestic peers. This tendency is partly influenced by the work of Piore (1979) on the 'dual frame of reference', where migrants compare employment conditions in the host country to those in their country of origin. This may lead international students to accept lower wages or poorer conditions that would otherwise be considered unacceptable in the host country. Clibborn (2021) reported that international students are willing to tolerate poor working conditions in the Australian labor market with lower wages or social status than in their home countries. Tolerance of underpayment reflects an acceptance of poor working conditions and can obscure exploitative labor practices, ultimately weakening efforts to address wage theft. Despite being paid below the legal minimum, many international students express contentment with their earnings. This satisfaction is shaped by factors such as peer comparisons, pressure to accept any job, and the belief that even low-paid work meets initial expectations (Reilly et al., 2021). This acceptance of underpayment contributes to the normalization of exploitation, making it more difficult to identify and address labor abuses while also weakening the impact of regulatory protections.

International students in Australia often have limited knowledge of their workplace rights, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Clibborn (2021) found that while 54% of survey respondents reported being aware of their rights under Australian employment laws and many recognized the existence of a legal minimum wage, none demonstrated awareness of award entitlements such as higher minimum rates or weekend penalty rates (Clibborn, 2021). This highlights a concerning lack of knowledge among international students regarding workplace rights, with some participants unaware of the legal minimum wage altogether and others mistakenly believing that wage entitlements differed between local and migrant workers (Clibborn, 2021). In contrast, research conducted by Farbenblum and Berg (2020) revealed that 84% of international students identified the legal minimum hourly wage in Australia and were aware that they were entitled to the same pay as Australian workers; however, there were significant gaps in understanding workplace rights. These misconceptions regarding legal entitlements and payment practices discouraged some students from reporting violations, as they believed they were complicit in unlawful activity.

International students in Australia are permitted to work a maximum of 48 hours per fortnight during academic terms, a policy designed to help balance work and study commitments (Department of Education, 2025). Such safeguards aim to create a fair and supportive employment environment, enabling students to gain valuable work experience without compromising their academic progress (Study Melbourne, 2024). However, a policy designed to protect students can also

heighten their vulnerability, as financial pressures push some to accept underpaid or cash-in-hand jobs. This issue has been highlighted in news reports, which cite cases of students who are employed in underpaid, cash-in-hand jobs, sometimes earning as little as one-third of the minimum wage (Vincent, 2020), while Teicher (2020) identified the growing prevalence of wage theft, which has been described as 'a common business practice' in Australia. Farbenblum and Berg (2020) further documented widespread underpayment and wage theft, alongside other exploitative practices, including sexual harassment, workplace injuries, and unfair dismissal. The persistence of exploitative practices, including 'off-the-clock' labor and unpaid overtime, has even been likened to modern slavery (Teicher, 2020). Together, these studies revealed a clear discrepancy between Australia's labor protections and the lived experiences of international students, emphasizing the urgent need to raise awareness of workplace rights and empower students to assert them.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the employment-related experiences of international students. An in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and behavior was explored via semi-structured interviews. Ethical approval was granted by the Deakin University Human Rights Ethics Committee (2025/HE000258). At the time the interviews were conducted, the lead author was an international student who was pursuing a Master's degree at an Australian university and is currently working part-time to cover daily living expenses and to better understand the local work environment. These experiences motivated and shaped interest in this research, particularly as they related to working conditions, understanding of workplace rights, and strategies for managing financial pressures while balancing work and study.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were recruited through social media (including LinkedIn and Facebook) and snowball sampling. This recruitment approach employed convenience sampling, a nonprobability sampling technique wherein data were collected from individuals who were readily accessible to the researcher (Rahi, 2017). Convenience sampling was considered appropriate for this study because of its cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and ease of implementation (Jager et al., 2017).

Eligible participants included those who were 1) at least 18 years of age; 2) international students currently residing in Australia; 3) enrolled in an Australian higher education institution as international students; and 4) willing to discuss their lived experiences related to working or seeking employment in Australia. Prior to participation, all individuals were provided with a plain language statement and informed consent form outlining the study's purpose and procedures. The sample size for this study was 10 international students currently enrolled in Australian higher education institutions. This sample size was deemed appropriate for this qualitative study, as prior research has shown that data

saturation can often be reached within a relatively narrow range of interviews, typically between 9 and 17 (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted via Zoom. Recruitment and data collection took place between June and July 2025. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Each participant was provided with a \$50 gift card upon completion of the interview. Interview transcripts and accompanying field notes were imported into NVivo 12 to facilitate systematic coding and data management.

Data Analysis Techniques

This research adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of patterns within the qualitative data and the organization of rich descriptions across the dataset: (1) familiarizing yourself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The analysis began with repeated and active reading to achieve familiarity, accompanied by note-taking and the generation of coding ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the next phase, codes were assigned to data segments relevant to a particular theme or issue, enabling the analysis of relationships between codes, themes, and their hierarchical levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were then generated and developed into broader themes that reflected participants' experiences. For example, the theme of *financial challenges* was developed from codes such as "high cost of living" and "high cost of education," which reflected participants' descriptions of financial pressures. Similarly, the theme of Factors Discouraging International Students from Speaking Out was shaped by codes including "fear of losing job and not finding another", "cultural differences", and "fear of visa consequences", which highlighted participants' perspectives on why many international students remain reluctant to report unfair treatment. As the analysis progressed, the themes and subthemes were refined and reviewed for coherence, with subthemes added when necessary to enhance structure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final phase involved detailed analysis and report writing, incorporating participant quotations and data extracts to support interpretations and illustrate the significance of each theme.

RESULTS

Ten participants completed an interview, nine held student visas, and one held a poststudy work visa. The participants ranged from 20 to 39 years, were from a range of regions, mostly Southeast Asia, and were all women. Most participants were pursuing a master's degree (see Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic profile of the participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Region	Current education level
1	37	Female	Africa	Bachelor's Degree
2	22	Female	Southeast Asia	Master's Degree
3	25	Female	South Asia	Master's Degree
4	35	Female	Europe	PhD
5	39	Female	South Asia	PhD
6	20	Female	Southeast Asia	Bachelor's Degree
7	21	Female	South Asia	Master's Degree
8	25	Female	South Asia	Master's Degree
9	25	Female	Southeast Asia	Master's Degree
10	32	Female	Latin America	PhD

Three themes were identified: navigating employment; awareness, knowledge and ability to act on workplace rights; and financial challenges. These themes are presented below, with indicative anonymous participant quotes presented to protect privacy.

Navigating employment

International students face challenges in the workforce. The participants described barriers to securing suitable employment, and upon obtaining a job, they frequently encountered insufficient or irregular shift allocations or were placed on short-term contracts.

Participants described challenges in securing employment in Australia. They described submitting numerous job applications online and in person. Some participants were job searching for weeks or months, reflecting not only the limited availability of suitable opportunities but also the persistence required to ultimately secure employment.

When I moved to Australia seeking a job... it was a very hard search and the job hunt was very hard... I kept chasing down everyone like... not just applying online, I even met in person and gave out my resumes and stuff (Participant 3, South Asia, master's degree).

Other participants highlighted the experience of the stigma associated with being an international student, which hindered their employment prospects. Factors such as having a non-English name, limited English proficiency, and unfamiliarity with cultural norms were identified as barriers to securing work.

...if you don't have a white sounding name... I think stigma towards like whether or not the international students would be like proficient in English or would they be able to cope or would they be able to understand the culture and stuff like that (Participant 9, Southeast Asia, master's degree).

Participants reported that visa conditions, particularly restrictions on working hours, contributed to the challenges of navigating employment. Participants

reported their experience of employers being reluctant to hire international students because of the constraints imposed by their visa status. One participant explained that employers appeared to prefer applicants who could commit to longer working hours, which created a barrier for international students whose restricted hours limited their ability to secure employment.

The only thing I feel students are getting, you know, tough luck with jobs is just the visa conditions and the restrictions... they are just looking for someone who's ready to commit them with a minimum of 50 to 60 hours fortnightly and being a student, we can't commit anything more than 48 hours. And it's like they need to recruit two persons in place of one person... it's going to cost me more if I'm going to hire a student. And I guess that's the only drawback being a student (Participant 3, South Asia, master's degree).

Participants described limited work opportunities as a significant challenge in meeting their financial needs. Even after they secured employment, the lack of available shifts and the reduction in existing hours compelled them to seek additional jobs to supplement their income.

When you are going to work during the holidays, sometimes you would want to pick some more shifts, but there will be no shifts to pick up. So, you end up not having enough money... We cover up by maybe having two companies to work for if the other one fails, you go to another one so that you don't have a situation where you don't have a shift to cover your expense (Participant 1, Africa, bachelor's degree).

Participants worked in casual positions and part-time roles. Casual positions were highlighted as constraining future opportunities, as the unpredictable nature of casual employment meant that shifts were not guaranteed, leading to inconsistent income and heightened job insecurity.

So, in regard to job security, because I'm casual there isn't security... I do try to stay on top of things, but of course because I'm not employed as fixed or part time, there is that lapse in job security... sometimes I'm not as lucky to get 3 [shifts]. I either get 2 shifts, or I get like the third shift on a Saturday, which is a half day (participant 8, South Asia, master's degree).

Awareness, knowledge and ability to act on workplace rights

Participants had a range of understandings and perceptions of their workplace rights. This included their level of awareness and knowledge, the sources through which they accessed this information, and their capacity or willingness to speak up about concerns or potential rights violations.

Participants interpreted rights in relation to visa conditions, particularly the restriction on working hours. However, beyond these points, their understanding of broader entitlements such as minimum wages and protection against unfair treatment was limited.

It seems like I don't know my rights. I have never looked at any of the documents that pertains to my rights here... Yeah. Sorry, sorry.

Unfortunately, I just realised that I didn't know about my rights (Participant 5, South Asia, PhD).

Other participants demonstrated broad awareness, with some noting that they had actively researched workplace rights online or learned about them during the process of signing their employment contract. This suggests that participants relied primarily on self-directed efforts or employer-provided information rather than formal support from educational institutions.

I'm pretty familiar because my dad and I went through it together. So yeah, kind of know while I was applying for the visa... So, I scroll through every kind of website I could find, watch YouTube videos... (Participant 7, South Asia, master's degree).

Among those who demonstrated awareness, the FWO was specifically referred to as a key source of guidance and support, with participants highlighting rights such as receiving proper pay.

I think like international students have the same rights as Australians like I hope that everyone's aware of that. Like I mentioned earlier that there's the Fair Work Ombudsman or something and also like different bodies looking after that, you're getting paid enough and so on. So yeah, there should be same rights (Participant 4, Europe, PhD).

Participants expressed their ability and willingness to speak out about their concerns or assert their workplace rights. Most participants expressed both willingness and confidence in seeking assistance. While most did not specify particular issues, some noted that if their concerns were not addressed, they would contact the FWO for assistance, despite their limited overall understanding of workplace rights.

I can stand up for them and even consult my supervisor and for myself I can stand up... for my rights and... take my time to discuss with the person who maybe doesn't know about it. I will explain to them, but the best thing is we have got someone who supports us (Participant 1, Africa, bachelor's degree).

Although most participants demonstrated limited awareness of workplace rights, one participant emphasized that having knowledge was essential for feeling confident in raising issues. This participant explained that their ability to speak out depended on knowing exactly what they were entitled to.

Because I'm not aware... maybe I'm experiencing something but I don't know that I can voice out for that... if you are not aware of your right, you don't know what to voice out for. If I'm aware of my rights, then yes. But if I don't know what my rights are, if I'm not aware of my rights, then not. I will not reach out to them, to reach out to anyone like to get support and first and foremost I have to be aware of my rights (Participant 5, South Asia, PhD).

Participants identified several factors that they considered discouraged international students from speaking out about workplace issues, with the most common being fear of job loss and difficulty finding alternative employment, cultural and social influences, and visa-related concerns. These factors often overlap, with participants describing how practical circumstances, personal

beliefs, and individual perspectives interact to shape their views on why other international students remain silent about workplace rights concerns.

Participants frequently mentioned that the risk of losing their jobs and the challenge of finding other types of employment were deterrents to raising workplace concerns and rights.

Because it's like if I lose my job, like example for me, if I lose my job, I can't pay rent. What am I going to do? So, I think a lot of times, these kinds of factors probably motivate them to just not cause any drama like just take it at face value (Participant 9, Southeast Asia, master's degree).

Participants often compared their home country's norms to those in Australia. In their home countries, speaking out in the workplace was often discouraged or viewed as inappropriate, which they felt could carry over into their experiences in Australia.

I think we're built to be workers and to be quiet workers. You don't question authority and that's something that I think a lot of my [Southeast Asian] friends also kind of feel. It's like, uh, you know, like at the end of day they are the boss. What can I do... (Participant 9, Southeast Asia, Master's Degree).

Other participants highlighted social factors linked to their status as international students. They expressed feelings of not fully belonging in Australia and perceived that others might hold negative views of them, including seeing them as a burden. Such perceptions further discouraged them from raising workplace concerns, as they feared that speaking out could reinforce these negative attitudes toward international students.

I feel like some people see us as a burden, like we're taking the housing at the moment like before the previous elections, there was like big campaigns like sort of saying like, 'Oh yeah, we need to get rid of international students because they're taking our housing, they're taking our jobs and stuff.' So, we're already thinking that we are a bit of a burden to this country. We are not wanted here (Participant 4, Europe, PhD).

Participants said that some international students refrained from voicing workplace concerns because the assumption that doing so could jeopardize, or even result in, the revocation of, their visa. This misconception reflects limited knowledge of workplace rights and protections and may discourage students from reporting unfair treatment, thereby increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.

They think like if they say something wrong, like the visa will be revoked or something... we know our visa rights like our employment conditions and everything, but they are just scared that police will not know, or the cops will not know and do something wrong and our visa will be revoked. We have to go back to our country. They're just scared of losing their visas, like one major thing (Participant 7, South Asia, master's degree).

Financial Challenges

The primary motivation to work for most participants was financial necessity, to cover daily expenses and tuition fees, and, in some cases, to support their children. However, despite being employed, many participants continued to experience financial strain and reported difficulty saving, largely because of the high cost of living, tuition, and rent. These financial pressures not only revealed the precarious nature of their employment situations but also highlighted the constant challenge of securing sufficient income for essential expenses.

Although most participants were satisfied with their pay rates, this income was insufficient for savings or any unexpected costs. Participants mentioned that their earnings were mainly for essentials such as rent, bills, food, and transportation and that they received little to no financial support for daily expenses from family members.

.. It wouldn't cover my tuition fees, but it does cover my expenses. So, I get paid fortnightly, and I find myself planning and budgeting fortnightly as well, not as much as I would like to be... I would like to be saving more, but I feel like I spend more than I wish I could save (Participant 8, South Asia, master's degree).

In addition to meeting daily expenses, participants carried student loan obligations or were repaying previous study debts. As a result, a portion of their income was directed toward loan repayments, creating multiple financial responsibilities that added to the burden of managing everyday living costs.

I think the biggest expense is to pay back my study loan that I took for the master's course and that's taking a huge chunk of my income every month. (Participant 4, Europe, PhD).

Other participants were supporting children, which further intensified the pressure to manage overall expenses.

If I have got the hours to work more, I can say it's enough [for me to survive]. You can get what you want because sometimes you can manage to send as I didn't mention before I have got children, I can manage to send... some to my children for them to survive (Participant 1, Africa, bachelor's degree).

To manage multiple financial responsibilities and meet daily expenses, some reported increasing their work hours during school breaks when visa restrictions were lifted. In one case, a participant exceeded the permitted hours during the study period to supplement their income.

I'm actually a little bit naughty and sometimes I pick up some marking, even though my scholarship doesn't allow me to work more than six hours a week throughout the year. But I just couldn't survive without extra income sometimes (Participant 4, Europe, PhD).

Other coping strategies involved adjusting lifestyle choices to reduce spending. For example, one participant mentioned that they avoided socializing and traveling to manage financially.

I don't usually hang out with my friends or something like travel. I do want to, but sometimes I need to focus on what is more important. But

yeah, the time to hang out or travel is not my thing at the moment. But I will do that later (Participant 6, Southeast Asia, bachelor's degree).

DISCUSSION

This study explored the experience of international students while working and studying in Australia. This study offers an in-depth exploration of how knowledge, understanding, and capacity to act on workplace rights shape employment experience. These findings provide insights into the barriers international students face when navigating employment, overcoming financial pressure, and speaking out against injustice. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how structural constraints and information gaps influence the employment experiences and workplace conditions of international students in Australia. There are three key findings of this research: 1) the implications of a lack of awareness of workplace rights, 2) the stress of navigating employment, and 3) the financial challenges related to international student status.

The first key finding is the potential implications of international students lacking awareness of their workplace rights. This may reduce their ability to recognize violations and therefore limit their ability to act against unfair treatment. The finding of a lack of awareness of workplace rights is consistent with the work of Farbenblum and Berg (2020), who observed that international students lack awareness of their entitlements, constraining their ability to respond to exploitative practices. Such gaps in knowledge prevent international students from speaking out, reinforcing their vulnerability to exploitation in the workplace. Knowledge of workplace rights is crucial not only for recognizing unfair treatment and entitlements but also for addressing systemic power imbalances that heighten the risk of exploitation.

Although the FWO plays a critical role in providing guidance and support to international students, a lack of awareness about such services may deter students from voicing concerns. Most participants in the current study were unfamiliar with the FWO, reflecting a broader lack of knowledge about support services available to assist with workplace issues. As Reilly et al. (2021) note, there is no legal requirement for employers or institutions to provide this information; however, this void in information sharing leaves students with few tools to respond to actual or perceived violations.

Three factors were identified as discouraging international students from raising concerns or asserting their workplace rights: fear of job loss, cultural influences, and misconceptions around visa cancellation. These factors intersect to create a climate of silence that compounds students' vulnerability. Participants feared job loss as a primary reason they remained silent about unfair treatment. As most participants themselves worked to cover daily expenses, tuition fees, and other responsibilities, they acknowledged that they may tolerate poor conditions to avoid the risk of dismissal, which is consistent with the work of Piore (1979) described earlier. In a highly competitive and constricted labor market, securing employment is already a significant challenge for international students (Reilly et al., 2021), and within the current context of high youth unemployment, young

workers are less likely to report wage theft because of the risks of job loss and difficulties in finding alternative work (Howe & Dillon, 2025). These patterns mirror the experiences of the participants in this study, whose reliance on employment to meet essential financial needs further amplifies precarity and heightens their vulnerability to exploitative practices.

Cultural factors also contributed to barriers preventing students from speaking out. Participants compared their experiences with workplace culture in their home countries, revealing clear differences from those in Western contexts. Participants were accustomed to not voicing concerns, as their upbringing in hierarchical cultural environments discouraged them from speaking up. Widiastuti et al. (2023) similarly emphasized that Western organizational cultures tend to prioritize individual responsibilities and strict adherence to formal rules, whereas Eastern cultures are more likely to value hierarchical relationships, collective teamwork, and emotionally oriented principles. Moreover, Eastern contexts often reflect tightly coupled systems of control, whereas Western contexts embrace more loosely coupled structures that promote empowerment (Widiastuti et al., 2023). Consequently, participants from Eastern backgrounds, who emphasize hierarchy and control, described feeling less empowered to speak up or challenge authority, identifying this as a key barrier to raising workplace concerns.

The final concern relates to the perceived risk of visa cancellation if violations were reported. This misconception reflects both a lack of accurate information and the broader climate of fear in which many international students operate. In reality, employers hold no authority to revoke visas, even in cases where conditions are breached (Department of Home Affairs, 2024b). Nevertheless, similar to this study, Farbenblum and Berg (2020) reported that fear of losing their student visa was among the main reasons international students hesitated to assert their rights, particularly when they had worked beyond restricted hours or in some cases even when they had complied with work limitations.

The second key finding relates to the barriers international students experience when navigating employment. Despite persistent efforts, participants in the current study described difficulties in securing employment, as well as underemployment, or the lack of adequate opportunities to engage in paid work once employed. This finding is consistent with existing research showing that international students in Australia (Gribble et al., 2015), like those in other high-income countries (Chen & Rapp, 2026), face critical challenges in gaining employment, both during their studies and postgraduation. Employers have been found to show little enthusiasm for recruiting international students, with concerns relating to students' communication skills, cultural fit, and long-term work commitment relative to the cost of hiring and training them (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020). Although limited research has examined underemployment among international students, the difficulties experienced by participants in this study when seeking to secure employment reflect broader structural barriers such as visa restrictions and a lack of local work experience (Blackmore et al., 2017).

Structural barriers exist across many parts of the workforce, but for international students, conscious or unconscious bias from potential employers can prevent them from securing employment. Gribble and McRae (2015) reported evidence of workplace discrimination and reported that international students with non-English names were more likely to be overlooked by employers. In the current study, only one participant reported hearing from others that her difficulties in securing employment were linked to her non-English name; however, the nature of this form of bias could mean that it is not easily observed. Such patterns may occur more broadly in Australia (Gribble et al., 2015) and in other high-income countries (Lu & Everson Härkälä, 2024; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024), potentially reflecting the public's negative perceptions of international students (Nguyen & Hartz, 2020).

The final key finding relates to the significant financial challenges experienced by international students. The primary purpose of a student traveling to another country to engage in education is for them to achieve a qualification, with the hope that such an education will increase their earning ability (Netz & Cordua, 2021). However, the reality is that many international students experience financial hardships and are required to engage in the workforce to alleviate these financial pressures, risking their education attainment. Participants in the current study engaged in employment to cover daily living expenses, tuition fees, and, in some cases, childcare responsibilities. This finding is consistent with the findings of Thamrin et al. (2019), who conducted an online survey on work–study conflict among international students in Australia and reported that many students took up employment mainly to earn extra income and manage living costs.

LIMITATIONS

Although this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of international students in Australia, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the small sample of all females and the limited geographical scope of this study constrain the generalizability of the findings to the broader international student population. The absence of participants engaged in the gig economy restricts insights into the distinctive challenges faced by students in this expanding sector of employment, despite other research finding evidence for this area of vulnerability for international students (Ravenelle et al., 2021).

Despite these limitations, the study has several strengths. The qualitative approach was well suited to capturing a range of experiences and perspectives while emphasizing depth and contextual richness through open-ended questions (Lim, 2025). This approach also allowed the generation of rich data through detailed insights into the complex and multifaceted dimensions of social behaviors and interactions (Lim, 2025). Future research could aim to recruit a larger and more diverse sample across multiple states, include participants of different genders and from a wider range of occupational sectors, and conduct comparative studies in countries with significant international student populations. Greater participant diversity may generate richer insights and enable researchers to identify patterns, inconsistencies, and unusual cases, deepening the

understanding of people's experience within their broader context. Overall, this study generated rich qualitative data that captured varied working experiences, offering valuable contributions to understanding the employment realities of international students in Australia.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the employment experiences of international students in Australia, focusing on the barriers and enablers to workplace rights, working conditions, and the financial contexts shaping their working lives. It also highlights the vulnerability of international students to workplace exploitation. With many international students working while studying, this study revealed key insights into their employment experiences, including the challenges of navigating employment, limited awareness of workplace rights, reluctance to speak out, and financial challenges. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on the vulnerabilities of international students in the labor market and offers insights to inform policy, institutional practice, and future research. The findings emphasize the urgent need for coordinated action by universities, governments, and employers to strengthen workplace protection, raise awareness of rights, and reduce barriers to fair employment. Addressing these issues is essential not only to support international students in meeting financial needs but also to enable them to assert their fundamental rights and participate fully in an equitable labor market.

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