



FEATURE

International Students Need Not Apply

Amid shifting attitudes on immigration worldwide, major English-speaking countries are erecting policy barriers to students from abroad

By **JON MARCUS**

WEIHONG LIANG GESTURES at his fellow students walking by on Science Road on the University of Sydney's sprawling campus, laughing as he notes that fully half of them have—like him—traveled here to study from other countries.

“If I wanted to understand something about Afghanistan, I can probably find a student from there [to ask],” says the doctoral candidate in social sciences from China.

Being surrounded by people from around the globe, though, has a deeper significance than that, says Liang, who serves as education officer of the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association. “It’s about innovation. It’s about communication. People should know each other.” Countries that play host to international students, he says, “become global influencers. They make friends around the world. When those people go back to their countries, they share common memories.”

That’s to say nothing of the billions of dollars in tuition international students pay, and the additional billions in trickle-down economic impact they represent.

For all of this, however, the warm welcome long extended to international students has suddenly chilled, in Australia and other English-speaking countries—not just the United States.



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Even as the breathless pace of deportations, visa delays, and other obstacles have been put in the way of students who want to study at American universities and colleges, the other Big Four destination countries—Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom—are imposing varying levels of restrictions of their own. These have come in response to rising anger over immigration, allegations that international students push up rent prices for everybody else, and suggestions that their real intentions are to cheat their way into permanent residency.

Some of those assertions have a basis in fact. Others appear not to. But they collectively suggest a growing level of suspicion of international students and their motives in the four countries that together enroll nearly half of all the students in the world who seek to attend college abroad.

When economic growth slows and domestic graduates have trouble finding good jobs, “people will often look for a scapegoat,” says Cecilia Enterline, senior immigration policy analyst at the U.S. pro-free-market think tank the Niskanen Center. “Some blame AI. Some blame international students. They’re kind of an easy target for the larger sentiment around pressure on the economy, pressure on the job market.”

In Australia, the center-right Liberal Party last year proposed capping the number of international students who would be accepted to the country, though the measure was withdrawn. Still, publicity around the cap—which would have lowered the number of student visas by 30,000, or more than 10 percent—had already discouraged some students from applying, while universities rejected others in expectation that the limits would be passed.

The government put up other roadblocks—tougher English proficiency requirements and greater scrutiny of international students who apply for visa extensions. It also introduced what’s called the Genuine Student Test, requiring applicants to prove that their principal reason for coming to Australia is to get an education. Authorities also more than doubled international student visa application fees, from about \$475 to about \$1,100, compared to \$715 in the UK, \$185 in the United States, and \$170 in Canada. And they increased the amount of cash savings applicants need to document, from \$17,000 to about \$20,000—more than what the average Australian has saved, according to the Reserve Bank of Australia.

Canada, meanwhile, has for the first time put a limit on the number of international students it accepts, in response to growing anti-immigration sentiment and concerns that international students push up housing prices in university centers. As a result, the number of applications to study there has dropped sharply.

While the UK has a stated goal of increasing its number of international students, it has added a restriction on bringing dependents, required applicants to prove they have enough money to support themselves, and banned them from working until they finish their degrees.

Meanwhile, the United States has revoked the visas of at least 6,000 international students for everything from traffic violations to alleged support for terrorism. The Trump administration, by executive order, increased the employer fee for the H-1B visas that many international graduates seek to stay and work here to \$100,000 per petition, up from \$2,000–\$5,000 per petition. Visa interviews were suspended for three weeks in May and June, exactly when students needed them to enroll at U.S. universities in time for fall. Then came an edict that applicants’ social media be vetted, further slowing the visa process while



Celebrating its 175th anniversary in 2025, the University of Sydney is a hub for international students, with 150 countries represented. But in Australia as elsewhere, universities are being blamed for driving “endless migration.”

discouraging some prospective international students from bothering to continue with it. Students from 19 countries have been banned from coming to the United States or face formidable restrictions.

That they have become less welcome in their host country isn’t lost on international students on the University of Sydney campus, including a group of them tapping on their laptops around an outdoor table in the Southern Hemisphere spring. The university in the quiet Camperdown neighborhood is the oldest in Australia, founded in 1850, and ranked in the top 50 universities in the world by the QS World University Rankings. Students from 150 countries are enrolled here.

“It was a bit complicated with the visa,” one, from Norway, observes drily. “It’s a bit sad how hard it is,” another, from Russia, pipes in. Both ask that their names not be used and their photographs not be taken; the Norwegian student aspires to apply to graduate schools in the United States, she says, and the others worry about making their opinions public.

The kind of antagonism these students fear provoking erupted three days later at “March for Australia” anti-immigration demonstrations in Sydney and other cities, where speakers blamed universities, along with banks, big business, and real-estate developers, for driving “endless migration.” Critics condemned the protests, which included remarks by a neo-Nazi and chants of “stop the invasion” and “send them back.” But the broader sentiment appears to be widespread. More than half of Australians think the number of immigrants coming to the country is too high, according to a June survey by the center-right Lowy Institute.



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Demonstrators took to the streets this fall in Australia (March for Australia), the UK (Unite the Kingdom) and Canada (Canada First) to protest their respective countries' immigration policies.

More than 100,000 demonstrators descended two weeks later on London to protest levels of immigration to the UK, where polling by the international public-opinion firm YouGov finds that 72 percent of people consider immigration levels too high—up from 44 percent three years ago.

Nearly 6 in 10 Canadians think the country accepts too many immigrants, according to a survey conducted last year by the Environics Institute. That's up 17 percentage points from 2022. And while nearly 8 in 10 Americans favor U.S. universities taking international students, half support limiting the number of Chinese students and around 40 percent want caps on the number who come from India, Nigeria, and South Korea, according to a Pew Research Center survey. Forty-two percent say international students who criticize U.S. foreign policy should have their visas canceled.

The pushback has already significantly reduced the number of people applying to universities in Australia, Canada, and the United States and caused at least a temporary dip in the UK, according to available statistics and projections.

"We're doing enormous damage, collectively," says Luke Sheehy, chief executive of the industry association Universities Australia. The ensnaring of international students in global hostility toward immigration is costing Big Four countries billions of dollars collectively, authoritative estimates suggest. It is also affecting the supply of highly skilled workers, lowering universities' once-dominant positions in global rankings, forcing layoffs of faculty and staff, and increasing tuition for their domestic classmates. And it is benefiting other nations happy to accept international students and the money and skills they bring, especially to critical industries, as popular sentiment in traditional destinations is driving them away.

The great majority of university administrators focusing on international education—93 percent in Canada, 86 percent in Australia, and 70 percent in the United States—say restrictive government policies are making it harder for international students to come, according to a survey by Studyportals, the Oxford Test of English, and NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

It's an ominous trend, likely to have significant

repercussions for the very economies where protesters are calling for it, says Sheehy.

“Be careful what you wish for,” he says.

A Booming Market

International higher education is a huge market, generating \$200 billion worldwide, according to the data analysis company HolonIQ. The number of students globally who pursue higher education abroad more than tripled, to nearly 7 million, from the turn of the millennium through 2022, the most recent period for which the figure is available from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO.

This historically created an irresistible recruiting focus for the Big Four, which capitalized on international students to subsidize their higher education industries as the supply of domestic students softened. Australia, Canada, the UK, and the United States all have among the world’s lowest fertility rates, with looming birthrate declines among traditional-aged college students in particular.

The United States attracted about 18 percent of the global international student market in 2022, the last year for which the figure is available from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The UK enrolled 14 percent, Australia 8 percent, and Canada 7 percent.

All charge full tuition to international students, without having to offer the kinds of discounts or financial aid that their domestic classmates get—including, since Brexit, the UK, which had previously accepted European Union students under the same terms as domestic ones.

Australia has become particularly dependent on international students. In the 1990s, the government subsidized 80 percent of operating costs of Australia’s higher education sector; that figure has since fallen to 40 percent. Universities have made up the difference by tapping into other revenue sources, including international student fees. The University of Sydney charges international undergraduates between around \$33,000 and \$41,000 a year, depending on their majors. That’s compared to \$11,340 for Australian nationals, who typically don’t have to pay until their income after graduation hits a certain level.

“Center-left and center-right governments agreed that it was a good thing for universities to pay for their own costs with their own income,” Sheehy says. International student fees became a major part of that equation. “If they all disappeared tomorrow, the government would be up for almost a 100 percent increase in what it would have to spend on the sector.”

Now some 30 percent of students enrolled in higher education in Australia come from elsewhere, the highest proportion in the world outside of Luxembourg, according to the OECD. So big has international higher education grown in Australia, it’s become the nation’s fourth-largest export, after coal, iron ore, and natural gas, according to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. International education generates the equivalent of about \$34 billion a year, the Reserve Bank of Australia calculates. More than half of the \$8 billion a year Australian universities spend on research ultimately comes from international student fees, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

“What you have is an increasing reliance on that revenue to cross-subsidize our research and also

teaching,” says Vicki Thomson, chief executive of the Group of Eight top Australian universities.

This reliance on international students isn’t unique to Australia.

In Canada, international students make up a fifth of university enrollments, the Conference Board of Canada reports; government figures show they contribute more than \$27 billion a year to the Canadian economy. (Only a surprisingly low 1 percent come from the United States, the Canadian Bureau for International Education reports.) International undergraduate tuition in Canada averages \$30,340, compared to \$5,620 for Canadians, according to the government agency Statistics Canada. In Ontario, about three-quarters of all the tuition fees for universities and colleges (which, in Canada, are akin to American community colleges) comes from international students, the Higher Education Strategy Associates consulting firm found. International students contribute \$16 billion a year in revenue to British universities in the form of tuition fees.

In the United States, international students bring in nearly \$44 billion a year and support 378,175 jobs, says NAFSA. Their numbers have been growing fastest at the graduate level, which generates the most revenue for universities, data compiled by the Institute of International Education show. At nearly 1,000 U.S. master’s degree programs, international students now comprise 80 percent or more of graduates, the Urban Institute has found.

Like so many other things, this steady source of income was abruptly interrupted by the pandemic. Pent-up demand and enthusiastic invitations to return resulted in big increases when international study resumed. By the end of last year, nearly a million international students were pursuing their education in Canada, three times as many as a decade earlier, according to the Canadian Bureau for International Education. The number of international students in Australia grew 57 percent between 2022 and this year, to 739,843, Australian Department of Education figures show.

As the battle over immigration heightened, this fast growth made international students a highly visible target.



International education has “lost its innocence,” says Gaby Ramia, associate professor at the University of Sydney.

International education “lost its innocence,” says Gaby Ramia, an associate professor and chair of government and international relations at the University of Sydney. “Before it became a mature industry, it seemed to be more innocuous. It wasn’t quite on the mass scale. So the numbers matter. The optics matter.”

As with many issues, social media turbocharged the conversation, Ramia says in his office in the university’s social sciences building, sheathed in bronze-tinted glass with Aboriginal artwork near the entrance depicting a type of traditional gathering at

which stories are told and knowledge is shared. In a country that particularly attracts international students from Asia and India, he says, “if [local] people see more faces that look different to an Anglo face, that’s what influences their perception.”

Universities themselves share some blame for letting international student ranks grow by so much, so quickly, says Elizabeth Collett, a global fellow at the immigration think tank the Migration Policy Institute. “Universities need to take responsibility for the fact that these numbers did increase quite sharply, without a lot of public debate about it,” Collett says. “Universities were a little surprised by that conversation. They weren’t really prepared to answer the question about what is the ultimate goal here.”

The resulting backlash proved to be as dramatic as the rebound.

Growing Opposition

In the last two years, international students in the Big Four countries have been blamed for a range of ills and misdeeds, including driving up rent, using education visas to establish permanent residency, stealing state secrets, and squeezing out worthy domestic applicants for university admission. Critics also say that many students from abroad don’t speak English well enough to function at the college level.

“You have a well-qualified, middle-class American kid from the heartland, who doesn’t get a spot in these universities because some Chinese oligarch who’s paying \$100,000 a year takes up that spot,” U.S. Vice President JD Vance told Fox News. “It’s not just bad for national security, it’s bad for the American dream.” (In fact, as domestic enrollment declines, almost all but the most selective American universities fear having more seats than students and have been steadily raising their acceptance rates.)

Rising rental costs are particularly triggering to voters, and politicians increasingly cite competition for housing from the growing number of international students as a chief cause of such price hikes. The Canadian federal government, in part because of what it called “pressure on housing, health care and other services,” last year capped the number of international students at 360,000—down 35 percent from 2023. “It’s a bit of a mess, and it’s time to rein it in,” Immigration Minister Marc Miller said. In Australia, Liberal Party Senator Sarah Henderson said the governing Labor Party’s “opening of the floodgates to record levels of international students is fueling the housing crisis,” and Labor Treasurer Jim Chalmers agreed that the growing number of international students “puts pressure on prices and rents.”

It’s hard to know if international students actually push up housing costs, at least outside of urban areas and for the kinds of accommodations nonstudents are willing to accept. Myriad research in Australia has concluded that they don’t. The Royal Bank of Australia, for instance, found that competition for accommodations from international students “was not a major driver” of higher rent. On the other hand, as then Shadow Minister for Housing Michael Sukkar pointed out, universities have been slow to provide housing for the many international students they accept, adding only one bed for every 42 new students from abroad. And in Canada, the decline in the number of international students since last year’s cap was put in place is credited with reducing published rent prices by between 2.4 and nearly 5 percent.

International students bristle at this narrative. They’re the ones, says Weihong Liang, who bear the brunt of scarce available housing in Sydney, where rent costs last year reached a record high. He shared a

one-bedroom, one-bath flat with three other people, Liang says, and knows of other students who split not only rooms, but beds, in shifts.

“These shortages are not the result of having international students. They’re a result of underinvestment in housing,” says Amir Moghadam, a PhD candidate in biomedical engineering at the University of Toronto and chair of the International Students Constituency of the Canadian Federation of Students.

Fewer than 4 percent of international students in Australia get university housing, according to researchers at the University of Technology Sydney. More than half live with at least two other people, 38 percent with three or four, and 10 percent with six or more. A quarter share a bedroom with at least one other person who is not a significant other, and 11 percent with two or more.

Some critics charge that education visas have been used as shortcuts for people who want to immigrate. In Canada and Australia, unscrupulous intermediaries are accused of helping people from abroad get education visas to slip into the countries, politicians have suggested. Increasing numbers then request asylum or are alleged to “visa hop”—moving from one to another kind of education visas, then to post-study work visas—to avoid having to leave. The UK experienced a big increase in the number of dependents students brought with them.

Australia’s right-wing populist One Nation Party has charged that international student visas there have become a back door to permanent residency. In addition to raising housing prices and taking jobs that could otherwise go to Australians, “a lot of these students actually don’t spend a lot of time in universities,” One Nation leader Pauline Hanson said in a televised interview. (Like every other organization opposed to international students in Australia, Canada, and the UK, the party did not respond to requests for comment.) Australian universities, Hanson said, “were built for Australian students. That’s what I’d like to see.”

The total number of pending asylum claims in Canada more than tripled between 2018 and 2024, to about a quarter of a million that year, according to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada—another reason given by the government for the cap on international students. In the UK, the proportion of students staying after completing their courses rose from fewer than 20 percent in 2019 to more than half by 2024. The number of dependents accompanying students on education visas in that country increased tenfold between 2019 and 2023, to 152,980, the government reports.

People from other countries unquestionably see international degrees in Big Four countries as a route to permanent employment in them, with the accompanying higher pay and generally better standard of living. That’s why more than half who come to the United States, for instance, study science, technology, or engineering, which can lead to coveted tech jobs, and the number who stay under a temporary work visa in the Optional Practical Training, or OPT, program reached a record high last year. Similar trends prevail in Australia, Canada, and the UK.

“Often right now when we’re seeing growing anti-immigration sentiment, it’s based on a sense of a lack of control over the immigration system, says the Niskanen Center’s Cecilia Enterline. “Some people view international students as, they are supposed to come as students and then leave but are using it as a pathway to longer status.”



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Weihong Liang, a postgraduate fellow at the University of Sydney, takes exception to the notion that international students drive up housing costs, noting how many must squeeze into small apartments and share beds to afford rent.

Employers are also accused—by the Trump administration, representatives in Congress, and scholars at Rutgers and Howard universities—of exploiting international graduates, paying them less than they’d have to pay domestic employees under what critics call a system of indentured servitude; any who complain, these critics say, risk being stripped of the sponsorships these visas require.

Research suggests, however, that the issue of whether international students are trying to evade the normal immigration process is also less straightforward than it seems. Ramia, at the University of Sydney, finds that 16 percent of international students in Australia seek permanent residency—fewer than the government itself says it needs to fill jobs for which there aren’t enough Australians. Yvonne Su, an immigration researcher and director of the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University in Toronto, has shown that students there represent about 11 percent of the total number of asylum claims, and falling; in all, Su found, fewer than 2 percent of international students in Canada apply for asylum. And in spite of allegations that international graduate students are gaming the system to get permanent residency in the UK, a government review in that country found “no evidence of any significant abuse.”

That these abuses might be happening at all, however, has prompted governments to change the rules.

Cracking Down

Even before Donald Trump returned to the White House for a second term and turned his sights on

international students, they were finding their access narrowing to the other three English-speaking countries that have long shared dominance of global education with the United States.

Those most visible measures—setting limits on international student numbers, doubling visa fees, barring dependents—have been exacerbated by additional red tape and other obstacles, and by so many changes in policies that they’re hard for even professionals to follow.

While the proposed cap on international students in Australia didn’t materialize, for example, the government slowed down the processing of student visa applications beyond a specified number, ultimately granting 60,000 fewer higher education visas for the 2023–24 academic years than for 2022–23, under what is known as Ministerial Direction 107.

In the UK, the government instituted a points-based immigration system that evaluates student applicants on factors such as their academic qualifications and performance on a test of English language skills. They also have to prove that they have enough money (\$2,000 a month in London; \$1,500 a month elsewhere) to support themselves.

To crack down on unqualified applicants who misuse education visas to stay permanently, the British government announced that it will penalize universities if more than 5 percent of their accepted international applicants have their visa applications rejected. That’s down from the previous 10 percent. In September, the Home Office texted and emailed 10,000 international students to warn them against making illegitimate asylum claims.

Not surprisingly, steps such as these have discouraged prospective international students from applying to universities in the Big Four nations. The number of applicants to study in Canada fell by 24 percent in the first half of this year, the government reports. In Australia, the number of new international students in the first six months of the year was down 21 percent compared to the same period the year before, government statistics show.

Although it’s still too early to know how the Trump administration’s crackdown will affect enrollment, the number of international students arriving in the United States in August, just before the start of the fall semester, was down by nearly 20 percent compared to the same period the previous year. An analysis of federal data by NAFSA and JB International suggests that the number of international students coming to the United States could fall by as much as 40 percent, at a cost to the economy of \$7 billion.

In the UK, the number of people entering the country on study-related visas fell sharply last year, to 266,000, the Office for National Statistics reports, down from 423,000 the year before. Most of the decline was among students’ dependents. As other options closed, the number of international students in the UK rose slightly this year, with a big increase in the number of students from China (and a 14 percent jump in the number of American students who applied, which reached a 20-year high).

Still, higher financial requirements discouraged about 12 percent of prospective international students from applying to universities in the UK, according to a survey by the Northern Consortium of UK Universities. A quarter said they wouldn’t apply to Canada, and nearly 4 in 10 said the policies of the Trump administration made them unlikely to go to the United States. More than a third of students worldwide who considered Australia as a destination said their decision was affected by the debate over enrollment

caps. The reduction of international applicants affects the full spectrum of institutions in all four countries—from community colleges to small liberal arts schools to big research universities—but particularly those in urban areas, where students tend to gravitate.

Signs indicate that public- and private-sector stakeholders in some of these countries have become alarmed by such trends. They've seen university budgets cut, with resulting layoffs of faculty and staff. Employers have also raised alarms about interruptions in the flow of international graduates they need to fill jobs for which there aren't enough domestic applicants.

Australia responded to the drop in international student numbers by raising its cap on new foreign students by 9 percent for 2026 and speeding up processing times. Canadians, too, have had misgivings. "It's like a really bad breakup, when you go, 'Oh, I actually need her and she's not crawling back to me,'" says Yvonne Su of York University's Centre for Refugee Studies.

Narrowing the international education pipeline reaps labor market consequences. In the United States, for instance, international students earn nearly two-thirds of master's degrees in computer science, two-thirds in fields related to artificial intelligence, and more than half in engineering. Half of international graduates with master's degrees and three-quarters with doctoral degrees stay in the country, the bipartisan Economic Innovation Group reports—generally sponsored by employers. Many leave because of limits on the number of visas issued for that purpose; the number of H-1B visas, for example, hasn't increased since 2006, and the number of green cards based on employment hasn't gone up since 1990. If the supply of such graduates dwindles further, there are not enough Americans to make up for them, according to the National Science and Technology Council; only one in five college-bound American high school students, the council says, is equipped to pursue a major in science, technology, engineering, or math. Similar situations prevail in Australia, Canada, and the UK.

"We have enormous potential economically. But we cannot train all the engineers we need. We need engineers from other countries," says Sheehy, of Universities Australia. "We can't train all the nurses we need, or the teachers. International students are not only funding the system. They're also skilling up Australia."

Hostility toward international students, budget cuts, and other issues are also taking a toll on American and Australian universities in the international rankings on which many students base their choices. No fewer than two-thirds of American and 25 Australian universities declined in the QS World University Rankings, for example, making them less desirable to applicants from other countries.

Then there are the so-called soft power effects. Big Four countries that have long been favored destinations of the world's elite have educated disproportionate numbers of students who have returned to their home countries and taken important positions in business, government, and other fields. Seventy currently serving world leaders outside of the United States were educated there, 58 in the UK, and 7 in Australia, according to the British Higher Education Policy Institute's *Soft Power Index*.

"When we make it harder globally for students to move around, we're closing our borders to future business relationships, future diplomatic relationships, and innovation, entrepreneurship and research," says Fanta Aw, president of NAFSA. And with fewer international students coming to the Big Four, "we

end up with a more closed-off society,” says Mihnea Cuibus, a researcher at the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford who studies unauthorized migration and asylum.

Vicki Thomson at the Group of Eight saw this firsthand when tensions with China in the 2010s resulted in tariffs on Australian seafood, beef, and wine. “There was some initial nervousness that they would impose the same rules on [Chinese] students coming to Australia,” Thomson says. But because of connections Chinese officials had formed during their own education in Australia, “we were the one sector that was never compromised. Those people-to-people links withstood the geopolitics of the time.”

As the Big Four’s market share falls, rival destinations are capitalizing on this decline, including Germany, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea, and Taiwan. These and other nations have been actively recruiting international students turned away by Australia, Canada, the United States, and the UK, eager for the revenue and skills such students offer. “The bad news is their preferred destinations are not as welcoming to them,” Aw says. “But while the doors are closing in some of these large receiving countries, the doors are opening in others.”

The number of university courses in non-English-speaking countries being taught in English—the preferred language of business and diplomacy, and therefore important to many of the students who choose to pursue education abroad—has increased nearly 50 percent since 2019.

Some countries are approaching international students as strategic assets. “The number of African students studying in China, for example, is a strategic choice,” says Collett, at the Migration Policy Institute—part of an effort to build closer ties with African nations and the resources they offer.

Lost in all of this activity are the people on whom the effect of these shifts seems most overlooked: the students at the center of them.

Changing Policies, Mixed Messages

That so many international students continue to apply to universities in the Big Four countries is a testament to determination and long-held aspirations, given that the process now entails navigating a minefield of admission applications, financial requirements, English-language tests, and visa interviews, well before traveling away from home to increasingly inhospitable destinations.

“There are a lot of pressures,” Yiman Wu, co-president of the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association, says with some level of understatement. A Chinese student who got a bachelor’s degree in the UK, Wu is studying toward a master’s in media in Australia.

Students around the world who wish to pursue an international education have found it confounding to follow the changes in, and frequent reversals of, policies that affect them. They face, at worst, hostility, and, at best, confusion.

“It impacts your studies. It impacts your success,” says Moghadam, the doctoral candidate in Toronto. Mary Feltham, chair of the Canadian Federation of Students, says, “People are being treated in a way that they no longer feel human.”

Fifty-five percent of international students in the UK said anti-immigration rhetoric and visa and

financial anxieties affect their mental health, a survey by the Migrants Nights Network found. About 3 in 10 international students in Australia said they had experienced discrimination, one survey found.

“It’s very coded now, that ‘international students’ equals ‘other,’” Su says. “They’ve had coffee thrown at them. They’ve been threatened. They’ve had their turbans ripped off their heads. They’re just easy to blame.”

As Thomson puts it: “Just imagine if you are a student. How are you feeling? Or if you’re a parent. Why would you send your student to Australia if you don’t feel like they’re going to be welcomed?”

Policies change quickly, and messages are mixed. In the United States, for example, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in May that applicants to U.S. universities from China would face heightened scrutiny, and the administration would “aggressively revoke” the visas of some students from China already enrolled. Then, as fears mounted of the economic toll, the president said in August that he would welcome Chinese students. “I think it’s very insulting to say students can’t come here,” Trump said.

For those students, “the piece that’s really unsettling is the capriciousness of policy change,” Collett says. “You want to know that when you go to a country in year one, the requirements will remain the same, and it feels a little less stable at the moment.”

Prospective international students are increasingly adrift in all of the added red tape, says Laura Charge, who runs a UK immigration consulting firm called Charge Solutions. “There are too many changes. There’s too much risk. If they get a refusal, their chances of studying in the UK are more or less over.” More confusing still is the fact that “these are the people that Britain keeps saying they want. So the message is really mixed for the students.”

A former government immigration officer, Charge says, “I wrote policy for 25 years and I still find it jarring to keep up with all the changes. If you’re a student, why would you have this information?”

This unstable policy environment is taking a toll even on international enrollment professionals, says Clay Harmon, executive director of the Association of International Enrollment Management, which represents recruitment agencies.

“It’s exhausting and really challenging,” says Harmon, who says he’s also seeing student interest shift to



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“We need to be able to work with a diverse set of people,” says Angus Fisher, president of the University of Sydney’s Students’ Representative Council.

other countries. “The fact that the Big Four are in a more restrictive mode right now means that the demand has to go somewhere.”

International students appear to have at least one group of supporters: their domestic counterparts.

Angus Fisher, president of the Students’ Representative Council at the University of Sydney, concedes that some Australian students may express annoyance when international students arrive with poor English skills—but sharing a campus with visitors from around the world actually “drives down xenophobia. It drives down stereotypes. We need to be able to work with a diverse set of people.” Besides, he says, it isn’t lost on Australian students that their international classmates “subsidize everybody else’s education.”

For that entirely practical reason, Cuibus, at Oxford, is optimistic that politicians in the Big Four destination countries will eventually reconsider what they stand to gain by accepting students from abroad.

“It’s too early to think that all of the progress of the last decades will be reversed,” he says. “Even though you have these political pressures going on, you also have quite strong structural factors for students to keep on coming.” **E**

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