COMMENTARY

WATER SAFETY FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING IN AUSTRALIA

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Water safety for international students is an issue shared by many nations, especially with the globalization of education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018). In 2016, for example, there were over 4.8 million international students globally, up from 2 million in 2000. More than half of these students were enrolled in educational programs in six countries: the US, the UK, Australia, France, Germany, and the Russian Federation. Prominent sending countries of international students include China, India, Germany, South Korea, Nigeria, France, Saudi Arabia, and several Central Asian countries (Migration Data Portal, 2018).

As an island destination with more than 10,000 beaches Australia has always been a leader in water safety. The first surf lifesaving club was established at Bondi, Sydney in 1907 and there are 314 clubs currently operating nationally (Surf Life Saving Australia, 2018). In recent years there has been an increased appreciation of the difficulties faced by international visitors to Australia in relation to water safety and a growing understanding of the challenges in assisting people

from overseas to become comfortable and safe in and around water (Wilks, 2017). A new 10-year national study of overseas born drowning deaths by Royal Life Saving Australia reveals that 23% were overseas tourists and 8% were international students (Pidgeon, Barnsley, & Mahony, 2018). Recognizing this vulnerability there have been calls for universities to make swimming and water safety classes compulsory for international students (Sarwal, 2017).

Unfortunately, relying only on drowning figures tends to underestimate the problem, which also includes “near misses” where international students are rescued by lifesavers or lifeguards at the beach, cases where international students manage to escape a rip current and get themselves back to the beach frightened and exhausted, and cases where international students do not have the confidence to enter the water in the first place, therefore missing an opportunity to enjoy a special experience during their time studying in Australia.

Universities have statutory responsibilities for the safety of their students. For example, under the *National Code of Practice for Providers of*

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the registered provider must:

- 6.9.1 Take all reasonable steps to provide a safe environment on campus and advise overseas students and staff on actions they can take to enhance their personal security and safety
- 6.9.2 Provide information to overseas students about how to seek assistance for and report an incident that significantly impacts on their wellbeing, including critical incidents
- 6.9.3 Provide overseas students with or refer them to (including electronically) general information on safety and awareness relevant to life in Australia.

In response to point 3 above, many universities offer information on water safety during student orientation periods through talks by surf lifesaving groups (e.g., Surf Life Saving New South Wales, 2018) and there are short videos (Southern Cross University, 2018) and information on water safety in many languages available to students on the Internet (Beachsafe, 2015).

The University of New South Wales YouTube video “How to survive beach rip currents?” by Professor Rob Brander is often used for student presentations and has been viewed more than 1.4 million times (UNSW, 2008).

Some universities offer international students opportunities to visit the beach in supervised groups, where there is usually a strong emphasis on rip currents since research has shown that international students are generally not familiar with rips and are likely to choose to swim at the point on a beach where a rip is present (Ballantyne, Carr, & Hughes, 2005; Clifford, Brander, Trimble, & Houser, 2018). Rips are the main cause of surf drowning deaths in Australia and account for the most lifesaver and lifeguard rescues (Brighton, Sherker, Brander, Thompson, & Bradstreet, 2013).

In a new study of international study abroad students Clifford et al. (2018) found that the vast majority (92%) had received no beach safety information prior to leaving for Australia, 85% arrived with no knowledge of the Australian beach safety flag system, and only 24% were able to correctly describe hazardous rip currents. While a safety briefing soon after arrival in Australia, as well as

visiting Australian beaches, improved knowledge and awareness, even after these experiences 20% were still unfamiliar with the flag system and 40% still could not correctly describe rip currents.

Recognizing a need in this area the Melbourne University Sport aquatics team were funded in 2017 to deliver a pilot learn to swim program for 110 students in Semester 1. The program, including an outing to the beach following pool swim lessons, was so popular that there was a large waiting list following the pilot. In Semester 2 an expanded program was offered to 800 students. Both programs had outstanding participation numbers (32% male and 68% female) with more than 15,000 total pool visits during the year. The participants, 84% of whom were international students, indicated a high level of satisfaction with both the program and their overall university experience (Melbourne University Sport, 2017).

The work at Melbourne University suggests that water safety assistance needs to be offered across a wide spectrum to accommodate:

1. International students who cannot swim at all, and are not comfortable in and around water,
2. International students who have some swimming ability but no knowledge of water safety or appropriate skills in open water situations (e.g., the beach, rivers, lakes),
3. Opportunities for international students with some skills and an interest to train and be qualified as lifeguards, recognizing the social engagement and employment benefits this might provide them.

So, while there appears to be a large number of quite diverse programs offered by universities across the country, ranging from information only, through basic learn to swim and on to advanced surf experiences, there is still very little known about the most effective ways to assist international students to become confident and independently safe in and around water. For example, how many learn to swim classes are the optimal number? And what specific skills are the most important to be taught? Is one visit to the beach as part of a supervised group enough or does it create a false sense of security?

Royal Life Saving Australia has developed excellent benchmarking for Australian children's

swimming and water safety skills (Pidgeon, Larsen, Barnsley, Scarr, & Peden, 2017) so a similar evidence-based approach needs to be applied to water safety for international students.

As noted in a new report by the Grattan Institute “Australian higher education is increasingly international,” overseas student enrolments are booming. Nearly 400,000 international students studied in Australian universities in 2016, and new visa approvals show that the number of international students in 2018 will significantly exceed 2016 enrolments (Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018).

We know that many international students do not have the skills or knowledge to remain safe in and around water. Yet during their time living in Australia they are likely at some stage to go to the beach or to participate in a range of water-related activities. As paying customers and under a general duty of care universities should be taking steps to help international students remain safe and to fully enjoy their time studying in Australia. In order to assist with water safety we need to develop and offer appropriate evidence-based programs that go beyond merely providing information—programs that build knowledge, skills, and most importantly, confidence based on supervised experiences.

Developing best practice for water safety in Australia and sharing this knowledge will also benefit other destinations that host international students from countries where water-based recreation is not necessarily common or familiar. Indeed, learning to swim and be safe around water may be one of the most important life skills an international student can be offered while studying overseas.

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