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CORONER WARNS OF BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Coroner Audrey Jamieson is calling for improved strategies to help international students engage mental health services in Victoria, following an [investigation into the suicide of 24-year-old Chinese national and Melbourne University student, Zhikai Liu](#).

Mr Liu sustained multiple injuries after falling from the balcony of his 21st floor apartment in Melbourne's CBD on 6 March 2016.

To understand the context of Mr Liu's death, Her Honour instructed the Coroners Prevention Unit (CPU) to analyse suicides of other international students in Victoria.

Between 2009 and 2015, 27 deaths were identified, but the CPU acknowledged this was likely to be an under-estimate.

The CPU studied the circumstances of the 27 international student suicides and a cohort of suicides among Australian-born students, to explore what might be distinctive about the deaths.

The findings included:

- a lower prevalence of diagnosed mental illness among the international student suicides (14.8%) than in the Australian-born student suicide cohort (66.7%)
- only 22.2% of the international student suicide cohort attended a health service for a mental health related issue within six weeks of death. By contrast, 57.1% of the Australian-born student suicide cohort had such an attendance within six weeks of death.

The CPU concluded that the data indicated an underlying systemic issue with engaging international students in mental health treatment in Australia.

This is supported by studies that have repeatedly found that international students in Australia are less likely than domestic students to seek assistance for mental health issues because of cultural, financial, linguistic and other hurdles.

The coronial investigation found that Mr Liu had suffered from insomnia and experienced a decline in his mental state since arriving in Australia in November 2015. His sister, Zizhen Liu, said Mr Liu had faced language barriers with local students and felt depressed and frustrated from difficulties understanding his university classes.

In the finding, Coroner Jamieson said, "while I am unable to conclude that Zhikai Liu would still be alive if he had engaged with a health service to treat his deteriorating mental state, at the very least this would have created prevention opportunities that did not otherwise exist."

Coroner Jamieson recommends the Australian Government Department of Education consult with Victorian organisations that provide education and support to international students, to identify strategies to engage vulnerable students with mental health services.