



Thursday 14 January 2021

More work needed to support international student wellbeing

Establishing a central, lead agency for the consistent coordination of mental health supports for international students is critical to preventing suicides, says Victorian Coroner Audrey Jamieson.

In a finding released today, Her Honour made the recommendation following a coronial investigation into the December 2018 suicide of Nguyen Le, a Vietnamese-born international student who died when he fell from a building at Melbourne University.

Mr Le's death is the second international student suicide investigated by Coroner Jamieson. In 2019, Her Honour released findings and recommendations into the 2016 suicide of Zhikai Lui, a Chinese-born international student. The findings included research on stressors experienced by international versus local students and showed that international students experience financial, cultural, linguistic and other barriers to engaging with mental health services in the community.

In light of Mr Le's death and ongoing concerns for the wellbeing of international students in Victoria, Coroner Jamieson directed the Coroners Prevention Unit (CPU) to revisit and build on the 2019 research to find opportunities to reduce the suicide risk among this group.

The CPU identified 47 suicides of international students between 2009 and 2019, and found:

- most were male (70.2%), and the majority were aged 24 years or under (63.8%).
- more studied at university (70%) than TAFE (10.6%) or a registered training organisation (4.3%); in seven cases (14.8%) the type of education institution could not be confirmed.
- consistent with previous coronial research, the analysis identified themes common to the suicides - including educational and financial stressors, isolation and homesickness, coupled with barriers to accessing mental health support.

In reviewing support services for international students, Coroner Jamieson noted that Study Melbourne, Victorian universities, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Commonwealth Department of Health, and many other organisations have put significant work into initiatives to bolster the wellbeing of international students since the 2019 coronial finding.

Initiatives include peer support programs, community and healthcare partnerships, welfare checks, targeted financial support, and the inclusion of mental health information in orientation programs.

However, Her Honour concluded that underlying systemic barriers remain for engaging international students with mental health programs – including unclear referral pathways between universities and health services, and divided responsibilities between State and Commonwealth governments.

To build on and consolidate current prevention activities, Her Honour recommends that DHHS act as a central coordinating body, to lead initiatives and disseminate knowledge across organisations working to ensure international students can access mental health treatment in Victoria.

Media Release



Coroners Court
of Victoria

A copy of the finding into the death of Nguyen Le can found here:

https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-01/Nguyen_186222.pdf

A copy of the 2019 finding into the death of Zhikai Lui can be found here:

<https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-01/16%201035.pdf>

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