Vulnerability and Resilience in a Mobile World: The Case of International Students

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Diverse groups of people experience vulnerability in an increasingly mobile world. Populations relocate to other countries for many and varied reasons including economic, environmental, personal safety, and/or educational considerations—generally for a better life. International students form a large and important component of this phenomenon. For international students, education is key to their success. International students are currently facing new challenges, particularly those from China who have been impacted by the Coronavirus situation and the resulting travel restrictions, study implications, visa concerns, and general community ignorance giving rise to xenophobia—all contributing further stresses. These challenges are in addition to long-held pressures including being away from traditional family supports, adapting to a different culture, study pressures, and loneliness.

For more than 16 years my work has focused on the safety and security needs of international students. While the vulnerability of international students has been consistently brought to the fore in my research, so too has their resilience. The vulnerability experienced by international students relates to risk and opportunity (Forbes-Mewett, 2020). These dimensions are factored into the decision to leave one's home country and the security of family and traditional support networks for the opportunity of an international education. Such decisions demonstrate an undeniable aspect of bravery.

In a 2015 study, I interviewed 150 key informers including international student support staff and international students across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia in relation to the issue of safety from crime (Forbes-Mewett et al., 2015). Importantly, the study acknowledges that most international students do not become victims of crime (Forbes-Mewett et al., 2015, p. 1). The interviewees paint a vivid and nuanced picture of international student vulnerability among many examples of resilience. Their poignant narratives help our understanding of how

challenges are overcome and why international education is a crucial part of the contemporary mobile world.

More recent work explored international students' vulnerability in relation to food security, housing, and campus security in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Forbes-Mewett, 2019b). Once again, it was shown the difficulties international students face and how they navigate and develop coping mechanisms present examples of great resilience. In relation to food security, the 2019 study presented a case of a student who communicated regularly with her mother at meal times via mobile phone text message to ask and receive cooking instructions. For this student who had no experience in preparing her own meals, not only did the strategy provide cooking instruction and ways to enjoy culturally appropriate food, but it also ensured comforting communication with a close family member at mealtime.

The above dimensions, among others, continue to contribute to international student vulnerability and at the same time present challenges to be faced and overcome—in many cases they are. Of recent times, the long existing issue of the psychological well-being/mental health of international students is gaining traction (Forbes-Mewett, 2019a). This attention is long overdue and crucial for helping international students manage their mental health to enable the successful completion of their studies. The mental health of Singaporean students was explored to find that this group, over a period of time, shifted from perceiving mental health issues as a taboo subject to a level of acceptance that they are a part of everyday life for many people (Gan & Forbes-Mewett, 2019). Further, the practice of seeking help was found to be desirable, notwithstanding acknowledgment that the help offered seemed to mismatch what was expected (Gan & Forbes-Mewett, 2019). This work was extended to show that intercultural adjustment tends to be a stressful process for international students, and as a consequence, it was contributing to a higher risk of vulnerable mental and emotional states (Gan & Forbes-Mewett, 2020).

In summary, the vulnerability of international students is a topic of ongoing concern with many and varied contributing factors such as outlined above. However, the resilience of international students in the face of such vulnerability is to be applauded. Given nations benefit so greatly from international education, we all must take responsibility to address the vulnerability of international students and ensure that they are well-supported in their educational pursuits and desires for a better life. To this end, my work relating to international students continues unabated.

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