

“YOU WOULDN’T NEED A SEXUAL HEALTH CHECK UNTIL YOU’RE MARRIED”: BARRIERS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

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Background:

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education is an overlooked area in the international education sector, even though SRH is an integral component of individuals’ overall health and wellbeing. This study was aimed to explore barriers faced by international students in accessing SRH initiatives, including information seeking, testing, and the overall engagement with SRH promotion strategies.

Methods:

We interviewed 15 staff working at tertiary education institutions (university, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), and English language school) and ran 2 focus groups involving a total number of 9 international students between August 2022 and July 2023. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.

Results:

Both staff and student participants mentioned several barriers for international students to engage with SRH initiatives. These include: lack of knowledge and education in country of origin and in Australia; language barriers; socio-cultural stigma around sex and sexuality; self-perception that SRH as irrelevant to them; socio-cultural construction of sex and sexuality as confined within a heterosexual marriage; and confusion around navigating Australia’s healthcare system. All participants agreed that tertiary education institutions should provide SRH education to international students to normalise the topic, breakdown SRH-related stigma, and to prevent unplanned pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmissible infections. SRH education was seen as an important element to maintain international students’ overall health and wellbeing during their study in Australia.

Conclusion:

International students are faced with both systemic and socio-cultural barriers to access and engage with SRH education. A comprehensive and culturally relevant SRH initiative could address some of these barriers, and for tertiary education institutions to play an active role is providing SRH education to international students. This has the potential to increase SRH knowledge so students can make informed decisions relating to their SRH during their study in Australia and beyond.

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