

## **Empowering international students: Improving sexual health outcomes through an integrated preventative health approach.**

### **Authors:**

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### **Background/Purpose:**

NSW's international student population continues to grow post-COVID, with 328,518 students enrolled in 2024. This Medicare-ineligible population faces unique health challenges, including limited sexual and reproductive health (SRH) knowledge and poorer sexual health outcomes. Cultural stigma, unfamiliarity with Australia's healthcare system, and concerns around confidentiality and cost often deter engagement in sexual health checks and services. While existing initiatives including the co-designed [International Student Health Hub](#) (ISHH) website, and the Sexual Health Peer Education Program (SHAPE) provide accessible SRH information and capacity-building, they have primarily operated separately, limiting their system-wide impact. An integrated, culturally responsive approach is essential to improve awareness, service linkage and SRH outcomes for international students.

### **Approach:**

The NSW Multicultural HIV and Hepatitis Service (MHAHS), in collaboration with Sydney Local Health District (LHD) implemented a localised, multi-level health prevention approach for international students. This approach integrates student engagement initiatives in partnership with Cultural Support Workers, development of tailored multilingual resources, and delivery of expanded SHAPE content covering broader SRH topics alongside ISHH promotion. Following a finalist nomination for the [2024 NSW Health Awards](#), this approach is now being scaled statewide across Greater Western Sydney and regional and rural LHDs, strengthening partnerships between educational institutes, local health teams and program co-leads to meet international students' health needs more equitably.

### **Outcomes/Impact:**

Since 2024, the program has engaged 3,647 international students and trained 194 peer workers across nine settings, enhancing self-reported health literacy rates from 75% to 91%. Implementation across multiple settings; universities, TAFE, student

accommodation, demonstrates the transferability and reach. Growing membership in the International Student Advisory Committee reflects expanding engagement and impact across NSW.

**Innovation and Significance:**

This integrated approach empowers students with SRH literacy and system navigation skills, influencing positive health-seeking behaviours in the long-term. Expansion is underway to address broader student well-being priorities, including mental health.

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